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PLAIN JOHN ORPINGTON.

BY THE AUTHOR OF 'LORD LYNN'S WIFE,'
'LADY FLAVIA,' ETC.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. I.



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PLAIN JOHN ORPINGTON.

CHAPTER I.

WHITEPARISH.

THERE was not an uglier village in Lincolnshire than Whiteparish, and there was not an uglier house in it than the surgeon's. The village itself, built on a spur of the chalk hills, just where their bleak range is bounded by the dead level of the fen country, was gaunt, treeless, and squalid. The dwelling, long, low, and of a dingy white, with its staring red roof and many small windows, had the untidy irregularity

of an old-fashioned farmhouse, unrelieved by the stir and bustle of which a farmhouse forms the centre. Once, evidently, it had been the abode of a well-to-do yeoman. There were extensive outbuildings, roofless and in ruins, that had in former days sheltered the farm-servants and the cattle. But these, like the abandoned yard around which they formed a square, were left in utter neglect. The sole exception was that in one of the smaller outhouses, the roof of which had been repaired, the surgeon kept his horse and gig. His name, according to the brass plate that had been screwed upon the weatherbeaten green door of his dwelling, was Orpington.

A man's repute among his neighbours may best be gauged, perhaps, by the fashion in which they speak of him behind his back. In that country-side all voices were unanimous in praise of the Whiteparish doctor.

He had the respect and good word, not only of the poor, who gave him brevet rank as Dr. Orpington, but of the richer patients, who spoke of him briefly as 'Orpington'—more often as 'John Orpington,' and very frequently as 'Plain John Orpington,' a prefix which he was held to deserve. It expressed the local admiration for his blunt speech, his almost Spartan homeliness, and his downright dogged honesty. And it argued the possession of no common share of such qualities, that John Orpington should have stood so high in the public esteem.

For the natives of that lonely and primitive district, like most persons who rarely see a stranger, were averse to new faces and suspicious of new comers. Whoever came from a distance to settle among them was described as a foreigner and regarded as an interloper. Uncharitable surmises were set on foot as to the immigrant's antecedents.

It was not seldom taken for granted that he had made his own neighbourhood too hot to hold him. Years of probation had to pass before the ban of social ostracism was entirely taken off, and the new arrival—farmer, artisan, or labourer—was admitted to the confidence of the prejudiced little community.

But Mr. Orpington's fair fame had preceded him, and had in some sense smoothed the way for his reception. The outgoing surgeon, from whom he had bought at a cheap rate the goodwill of his modest practice, had some knowledge of his successor's past life, and spoke warmly in John's behalf. People were prepared to like their new doctor before they saw him. His short and simple history was much in his favour. They heard how, when his father, a needy bookseller at Cromer, had become bankrupt, and died more of vexation than of any bodily

ailment, John Orpington had stepped manfully into the breach, and had taken the whole burden of maintaining his helpless sisters upon his own broad shoulders. How, being then an army assistant-surgeon in a regiment on the point of embarking for India, he had thrown up his commission, and with it his own prospects in life, and had gone home to Norfolk to begin the world again at the foot of the ladder. How, by acting as a most zealous and efficient assistant to one of the medical practitioners in his native place, by rigid self-denial, and by devoting his spare time to the copying of law papers and the keeping of tradesmen's accounts, Mr. Orpington had kept the wolf from the door.

Not only that, but he had managed to scrape together a small sum of money, sufficient for the purchase of a very humble practice in some remote part of the country.

Such, according to popular credence, was the origin of that little hoard of hard earnings wherewith John bought his predecessor's recommendation to his straggling circle of solvent patients. Not only the few who paid, but the many who could not pay, were glad to hear that their incoming doctor was so eminently respectable a personage. So good a brother, so honest a man, and so able a healer, would be a prize for Whiteparish and the parishes adjacent. For Mr. Joyce, their departing surgeon, had also told them, with perfect truth, that John Orpington had high testimonials to show that his skill was considerable, and that he had given up the certainty of promotion, and the probability of lucrative preferment, when he resigned his regimental appointment. And the Whiteparish practice was a sorry one. Mr. Joyce himself had merely vegetated upon its slender profits, while awaiting the post which his

influential friends had long promised to procure for him. And when at length the well paid berth in a London hospital became vacant, Mr. Joyce thought himself lucky in parting with his district to his successor on very low terms indeed. It was under these circumstances that Mr. Orpington came to take charge of the health of Whiteparish.

Curiously enough, prepared as they were to welcome him among them, the Lincolnshire people had not liked their new neighbour at the first. There was something in the surgeon's aspect that repelled sympathy, something that caused an inexplicable feeling of distrust and dislike, of fear almost, on a first introduction. But this unreasonable sentiment soon wore out. The distrust changed into confidence, the dislike into esteem, and the vague, formless dread merged into the more satisfactory feeling of respect. Mr. Orpington had been about five years

established at Whiteparish by that autumn season when this story opens. He stood high in the opinion of small and great. His professional skill—and he really was a very able practitioner—was the least of his merits. It was to his sound sense, his blameless integrity, his rugged simplicity of act and word, that he owed the affectionate *sobriquet* of Plain John Orpington. There was no one from Danethorpe to Lincoln on one side, or to the seaside place of Barwich on the other, whose advice was so valued, or whose bluff honesty was so vaunted, as the advice and the honesty of the ex-army surgeon.

As has been said, the doctor's dwelling had been originally a farmhouse, and the ancient kitchen or houseplace, a large comfortless room on the ground-floor, was now called the 'parlour,' and was the usual sitting-room of the family. Its present occupants were the surgeon's sisters, Bridget and Barbara, tall

and bony women, with thin lips, high cheek-bones, and cold eyes.

But whereas Bridget, the elder, was austere clad in a dark woollen gown, unrelieved by any glimpse of white cuffs or collar, and whereas Bridget's grizzled curls were as harsh as the mane of a mountain pony; Barbara, the younger, showed none of this cynical indifference to public opinion. Bridget was forty, Barbara was thirty-eight. Neither of the two had ever known a day's illness. Mentally and bodily, they might have been cast-iron women, so strong and so hard did they seem to be. And yet they had not, as the phrase goes, 'worn well.' They were old before their time. Perhaps it would be more correct to say that they had never been young. Their former neighbours at Cromer remembered them as two grim, old-fashioned children, then as two gaunt young women, then as two grisly old maids.

The eldest, Bridget, accepted her position as a matter of course, and was philosophically careless as to the supreme hideousness of her chosen attire. Barbara, on the contrary, was fond of dress; she wore faded silks, while her sister was in sober merinoes. Her dark-grey curls were daily daubed with oils and pomades until they glistened with a greasy lustre. She wore bugles and black velvet ribbons bright with steel beads or Roman pearls, and on gala days made a great display of mock lace, cheap tawdry jewellery, little twopenny gilt hearts and anchors, and the like. And yet it may be doubted whether the ugliness of stoical Bridget were not surpassed by the ugliness of ambitious Barbara. They were a terrible pair to look upon, and their quaint likeness to each other was the more remarkable on account of their different styles of costume.

John Orpington had another sister, but

her name was seldom mentioned in the family.

The apartment in which these two spinsters sat, was as cheerless a room as any in Lincolnshire. As the houseplace of a thriving farmer it had been well enough, but as a parlour it was detestable. The diamond-paned windows, the wainscoting of worm-eaten wood, the great beams that crossed the low ceiling, the queer box-seats that prevented any very near approach to the casements, still remained. But the cavernous chimney, the huge fireplace, with its ample space for the elbow chairs of the grandsire and the grandame, had been subjected to a woful change. The monstrous chimney in which many a succulent ham had swung, curing in the pungent wood smoke; the chimney corners where young and old had gathered in winter time to listen to old stories or to sing old songs—the glory of

these was dimmed for ever. The great andirons, on which monstrous yule logs had blazed and crackled and glowed the livelong night of joyous Christmas Eves, were as utterly out of place in that room now as the gay sheen of the scarlet-berried holly and snowy-berried mistletoe that once hung in thick bushes from the ceiling. Blocked up now with brickwork and sheet iron, the grand old chimney was hidden away for ever, and a mean little grate, which held a bare handful of seacoal, was the degenerate representative of the broad hospitable blaze that had died out once for all.

Gone, too, were the old oak presses, the heavy tables and dressers, the tall loud-ticking eight-day clock, the antique farmhouse furniture, stools for the young and chairs for the old, with, perhaps, even the luxury of a cushion for reverend age. These things had matched as well with the long

low room as did the former red curtains, the dangling fitches, the ropes of onions, the dried herbs, the smoked wild geese, and all the exuberant plenty that had graced the ancient houseplace before it began to be known by the name of a parlour.

The meagre furniture that had once filled the room behind the bookshop, scanty, mean, and shabby, now displayed itself, in an apologetic manner, as it seemed, in that uncongenial apartment. The threadbare carpet, stretched savagely tight, and eked out with a border of drugget, still failed wholly to cover the boards of the floor. But there were some framed prints upon the walls, and a portrait or two, cheaply done in oils by some Dick Tinto, whose evil stars had led him to Cromer, and there involved him in debt and drink; and over the mantelpiece, between two dusty glass shades, full of artificial flowers, was a narrow, bilious-looking mirror,

in a frame of tarnished gilding. Also there was a veteran piano, slim, and tall, and battered, and with a whimsical likeness to its owner, Miss Barbara.

But Miss Barbara was not now employed in pounding the loose keys of the jingling old instrument, as it was her daily custom to do at that hour of the forenoon. She was half standing, half kneeling, in one of the windows that had such antique diamond panes, and such deep box-seats, and which, as the room faced front, commanded a clear view of the white carriage road that skirted the house. Miss Barbara's tight lips were more compressed than was usually the case, and the lines on her high narrow forehead were more deep and strongly marked than when the younger of Mr. Orpington's sisters was mentally at ease. She stood, frowning darkly, for many minutes, and spoke no word, busy as she was in chewing the cud of

thoughts that were evidently displeasing. Then, at last, drumming hard the while upon the window-glass with the ends of her bony fingers, she spoke abruptly, and without turning her head.

‘We shall see. When John comes home, I mean to put it to him very plainly, I can tell you. Why should we be plagued with a chit of a girl that’s neither kith nor kin of ours? I say, decidedly not.’

Miss Orpington, who was knitting a stocking, plied her needles with perfect composure, and tranquilly replied:

‘Barbara, you’re talking nonsense, and you know you are. Do you suppose for an instant, if we had been in better circumstances, I should have advocated John’s burdening himself with the guardianship of a girl like that—a stranger to us all? But you know the reason. Three hundred a-year and no charge upon it but the maintenance of the

girl herself, which cannot exceed a pound a week, look at it as you will! I shall advise him to say yes.'

'But the trouble,' urged Barbara, in acid tones. 'The annoyance of having a tiresome child in the house, giving herself airs, very likely, and setting her cap, for aught I know, at every man who calls upon us.'

'You mean Mr. Peters,' answered the stern elder sister, quietly, but with a tinge of scorn. 'It's all moonshine, Barbara. He cares no more for you than he cares for Goody Gray from the workhouse. Neither you nor I shall ever be anything but old maids now.'

'Speak for yourself, sister,' returned Barbara, with an angry toss of the head. 'At any rate, I shall give my opinion, and pretty plainly too, when John comes back. And here he is,' she added, as the sound of wheels reached her ears, and immediately afterwards a gig came in sight, and drove rapidly up to

the door, where the strong, rawboned horse stopped of his own accord, as if by habit. There were two men in the gig, one of whom was a servant, a stout young farming-man, who looked ill at ease in his drab greatcoat and hat with a narrow silver band. The other, who sprang quickly down and entered the house, was John Orpington, member of the College of Surgeons, and the master of that dismal dwelling.

‘Here comes John himself, and now we shall see,’ continued Miss Barbara, doggedly, but in a lower voice than before.

‘Yes, we shall see,’ was Miss Orpington’s dry rejoinder. The latch of the old door rattled, and John Orpington appeared upon the threshold.

CHAPTER II.

PLAIN JOHN.

THERE are doctors and doctors. The very best of them all, the cream of the profession, are not a match for the conventional man of healing that we find in books. In books, alas! and nowhere else. No flesh-and-blood physician, surgeon, or apothecary ever gives proof of possessing the falcon eye, the fathomless learning, the profound wisdom that dives at once to the very mainspring of the malady, of those dear, delightful doctors that rush to the rescue in a novel. The medical sage of fiction, he whose eye is so piercing, and the very shake of whose oracular head rivals in

expression Lord Burleigh's own, cannot exist out of his native element of print. In this work-a-day, matter-of-fact world, he gasps and dies, like a fish out of water. And his representative is too often a purblind person, who fumbles, and gropes, and blinks in his short-sighted search for the real source of evil, hiding his ignorance meanwhile, as best he may, and clutching at whatever looks like a clue in the darksome labyrinth of diagnosis.

Even the great ones of the earth, those who live in kings' houses, and to whom purple and fine linen are the merest commonplace necessities, even these cannot hire, *à prix d'or*, the Galens that spring, full-armed, with diploma, lancet, and scalpel, from the brain of a novelist. Take M. Maxime Rougeval, for instance, he whose high destiny it is to feel the pulse of the Elected of the Millions, or take courtly old Sir Joseph, whose pair-horse pill-box of a brougham has its entrées

at all private gates of Buckingham Palace. Are they the real eldest-born of Æsculapius, the chiromancers whose contact imparts health, and to whose sagacious insight humanity has no secrets? Or are they merely pilots, who steer the august bark of a royal patient's life as best they may, blundering sometimes, guessing right at others, and for ever taking soundings, so to speak, heaving the lead, measuring the line, and doing their utmost to betray no apprehension when the shoals are near and the sunken rocks of death are frowning blackly among the shallowing waters?

And as with M. Rougeval, who is a Commander of the Legion of Honour, and has a patent of nobility that he locks up in his writing-desk, as Louis-Philippe's ministers hid the coronets that their fond old master forced upon them—as with him and the British medical baronet, so with others. Does Dr. McFee really earn all the paper-wrapped

guineas, all the crumpled five-pound notes, that are daily pressed into his practised palm ! True, he squeezes your hand sympathetically enough, and his smile is honey, and his words an emulsion ; but perhaps he knows very little more about your lease of life than you, his patient and paymaster. So with Dr. Tench, who takes up a different line, and jokes with you, and tells you funny stories, as you slip gradually out of life between his plump white fingers. So with dreadful Mr. Grindham, the great surgeon, who bullies the slaves that bring tribute to his consulting-room, and whose roar, and angry glare, and curt, rude questions are as much feared by nervous patients as were those of Judge Jeffreys. And whereas McFee and Tench always contrive to convey the impression that to be ill is meritorious, Grindham treats disease as a crime, and makes the sick very heartily ashamed of themselves as they

totter from his terrible chamber of audience. But it is not certain that Grindham, that Pope of his profession, is one whit more infallible than his brother Pontiffs, whose desire it is to make things pleasant to the suffering.

Yes, doctors vary, and their styles as well. Some are mysterious, some obsequious, some solemn, others jocular, a few are rough, and even brutal. John Orpington was of the bluff school. He spoke his mind with sturdy directness. He was bluff in looks, too, as well as in speech. A thickset, strongly-made man, with a grave, earnest face, very much freckled and of an unwholesome complexion, hair long, dark, and dank, a broad low forehead, and heavy jaw. A remarkable face. His hands, red, moist, and unpleasant-looking, with stubbly fingers, almost nailless, from a trick which the surgeon had of biting them to the quick when thoughtful, were remarkable too.

‘I have been thinking that business over—the guardianship, you know. I shall write to-day to the agents.’ The words were abruptly spoken, although the tone of the speaker was kind enough.

‘To refuse?’ inquired Barbara.

‘No: to accept,’ returned the calm, clear voice of her brother, as he advanced into the room; and then, drawing a letter from his pocket, continued:

‘I will read you Captain Morton’s own words. I think you will see that his letter leaves me no choice. My poor friend says:

“I am well aware, Orpington, that I have, strictly speaking, no claim whatever to ask you to burden yourself with the care and responsibility of such a trust as that which my will assigns to you. Between you and me there are no ties of blood, and our old friendship has, through absence and lapse of years, been somewhat relaxed. At the same

time, I am sure, both from your letters and from my recollections of our former intimacy when in the regiment, that you have preserved a kindly feeling towards myself, as I, on my part, have always esteemed and honoured you.

“ My failing strength warns me that I must be brief in setting down my reasons for this request that you will not refuse me the great service which I ask at your hands. I know well how onerous, to one so conscientious as you are, must be the care of a young girl.

“ But Blanche has, as I think you know, no near relations. She will be alone in the world, poor lamb, when once I am gone from her side. And I appeal to you, Orpington, not to reject what is, without exaggeration, my dying prayer. I have chosen yourself to be my poor girl's guardian, and the trustee of the little fortune she will inherit from me, for one simple and sufficient reason. I know

you will not believe that I desire to flatter you, when I set down the plain truth. From my death-bed I ask of you, as the most honest man that I have ever known, to be a father to my dear, dear child.

“ But you will undertake the care, will you not, dear old friend, that I, perhaps selfishly, cast upon you? Let Blanche find a home with yourself and your excellent sisters. Love her at first a little for my sake; until you learn—it will not be long first—to love and prize her for her own. I know, John, that you are not rich, but Blanche will not prove a burthen to your slender and hard-won professional income. I can only leave her three hundred a-year, after all my golden visions for her sake, but this will be spent for her benefit, at her guardian’s discretion. You will be that guardian, I hope and believe, and to your integrity and experience I commit my orphan girl, with a

confidence that soothes the last hours of my lingering pain. Be her shield from the snares and dangers of the world. Let Blanche have a shelter under your roof, a haven where no evil can come nigh her, where she may be secure from storm and shipwreck.

““ When she marries, years hence,—she is a child still,—I rely on you to see that the husband of her choice is an honest man, and to care for her interests as if she were a daughter of your own. You will find my will gives you full powers. My eyes and my hand are failing me. The words grow indistinct. I cannot——farewell, good, kind friend——God deal with you as you deal with the orphan and the fatherless.””

As Mr. Orpington concluded, Miss Barbara, who, to judge by the compression of her lips, had with difficulty kept back her words hitherto, peevishly exclaimed :

‘Oh, brother, surely you know we have already troubles enough in this house, without adding another care to what you know of.’

Here she was interrupted by her elder sister, who said :

‘You are right, John, as you always are. During the time you were reading that letter, I have been making my calculations, and I find that with strict economy we need not spend more than fifteen shillings a week upon our visitor. Then there will be something for clothes and other expenses, and I am sure we might reckon on saving over two hundred a-year during her stay, which will be a great help to us.’

The surgeon quietly refolded the letter, and replaced it in his pocket. His voice was as calm as before, as in his usual deliberate manner he rejoined :

‘Think this matter over. I have to call on Sir Phœbus this morning. When I return,

you will, I am sure, both think as I do. I should like to write by this afternoon's post to poor Captain Morton's agents, and shall doubtless be at home in time to do so. Therefore, unless you have anything else to suggest, I must hurry away to my patients.'

He left the room as abruptly as he had entered it, and in a minute more the wheels of his gig were heard clitter-clattering over the sharp flints of the road which led to Deepdene.

'John is always right,' said Barbara, suppressing a sigh, 'and I suppose we must try to make the best of it.'

'There is no doubt of that,' said Bridget, sententiously: 'but I still say we may do a great deal with the odd two hundred a-year.'

The discussion was never renewed. And thus it was agreed that Blanche Morton should become an inmate of the surgeon's house.

CHAPTER III.

ALONE.

ALONE on the deck of the good ship 'Ganges,' homeward-bound Indiaman, stood a young girl. She was dressed in deep mourning; and her slight form and delicate oval face gave her the appearance of being younger than her real age, which was scarcely seventeen. It was a glorious tropic night, and the great ship, under easy sail, was gliding majestically on over the heaving shimmering sea. Fore and aft, the white decks were flooded with moonlight. In that quivering radiance, the world-old alchemy of Dian's lustrous gaze converted the

meanest objects into precious and costly things. Ringbolt and rivet and carronade, the brass mountings of the tall binnacle-lamp, every scrap of burnished metal that the rays could reach, gleamed like pale gold. Even the coils of rope that lay amidships were transmuted by the soft moonbeams into massy cords of twisted silver, and the swelling sails that towered aloft shone in the liquid light like a silver pyramid. Viewed at that hour, and through that enchanted atmosphere, Cleopatra's galley was not more royally superb than this homeward-bound merchant ship, spreading her white wings like a belated albatross upon the far-off ocean.

It was late, and from the great cabin below there ascended faintly the sound of a piano and the hum of voices. The passengers had long since deserted the deck, and, with the exception of the helmsman

and the sailors of the watch, dimly visible as their dark forms clustered in the shadow of the bulwarks forward, that one slight figure was its sole occupant.

The lonely girl looked the more lonely, standing on the lofty poop of the Indiaman, with the thick black cordage of the rigging and the tall masts sharply defined against the starry purple heaven—looked, I say, the more lonely for the contrast between her slender gracefulness and the giant beauty of sea and sky. Her pure young face was very pale, and there were traces of recent sorrow around her large brown eyes. Her shining chesnut hair lay in plain smooth braids on either side of the white brow, and was gathered behind into a heavy coil. So she stood gazing out into the night.

There was much, indeed, in the grand, solemn splendour of the scene to interest one for whom the view must have had

all the charm of novelty. Above, glittering in the dusky violet of the boundless heaven, were such a moon and stars as only those latitudes can show, larger, brighter, stooping down to earth, like Artemis bending over the sleeping Endymion—a moon and stars which Europe knows not. Below, the mighty sea lay stretching away for leagues to the dim, faint verge of vision, glistening and aglow with phosphorescent lustre, every tiny wavelet tipped with St. Elmo's harmless fires, and strange coruscations of flickering light playing through the green depths beneath.

But the solitary girl on the good ship's deck looked neither at the Tyrian purple shot with gold of the African sky, nor at the sheeny sparkles of the African sea. Her eyes were fixed on the eastern horizon, the quarter where, as she well knew, lay the Cape of Good Hope, and beyond it

India and the Indian isles. The 'Ganges' had sailed from the Cape but two days since, and already the passengers were looking forward to Ascension and turtle, to St. Helena and fresh vegetables, and a stroll on shore, with a visit to Napoleon's grave, and the chance of seeing London papers of some three weeks old. There was only one of all that floating commonwealth who cared to look back regretfully towards the sunny land where her happy youth had been spent. She gazed long and earnestly, until the tears rose thickly to her eyes, and then, with a low, heart-broken sob, she turned away, and stood weeping silently.

'Beg your pardon, Miss Morton, but I hope nothing unpleasant has occurred. I don't want to intrude; but, 'pon my word, a lady in distress—'

And here the speaker paused, apparently unable to devise an appropriate termination

to the sentence. He was a dandified young man, whose attire pointed him out as one of the ship's officers, but whose personal taste had led him to improve upon the simplicity of the uniform. Mr. Chipperfield was in theory a lady-killer; but in practice he was, though a coxcomb, a good-natured specimen of his tribe; and there was something of genuine kindness in his tone as he blundered on:

‘I ought to say, Miss Morton, that the captain sent me to beg you would come below. These heavy dews, and this bright moonlight, you know — awfully unhealthy in the tropics here—and the skipper wished me to fetch you. But, if you like, I’ll go away at once. I don’t want to annoy you, I’m sure.’

Blanche Morton bent her head.

‘Thank you; I will come down directly. Would you be so good as to say I am coming down?’

But Blanche kept her tearful eyes and her sad, sweet little face averted, and it was evident even to the nautical Adonis beside her that she would prefer to enter the cabin alone. He bowed and turned away towards the cabin-hatch, saying, in his usual jaunty manner :

‘Don’t hurry, Miss Morton, I beg of you. The skipper is always rather fussy. I’ll tell him it’s all right.’

And Chipperfield’s gold-laced cap vanished down the companion-ladder.

Blanche Morton, again left alone, cast one long, lingering look towards the moonlit eastern sea, beyond which lay the only home she had ever known—desolate and abandoned now. Then suddenly stretching out both her slender hands, she wrung them with a half-unconscious gesture of despair, and turned mournfully away. In a few moments more she glided quietly into the crowded cabin.

CHAPTER IV.

WHO IS SHE?

THE cabin was nearly filled by the various groups of passengers, reading, chatting, working, playing at cards, or clustering about the piano, at which a pale German in spectacles, Mus. Doc. of Heidelberg or Weimar, late director of the orchestra to the Rajah of Furruckabad, was belabouring the ivory keys most severely. At a whist-table sat good Captain Morris, the commander of the 'Ganges,' a stout, elderly personage, with a complexion of Honduras mahogany and a keen pale blue eye. His partner was a Bengal field officer, and his adversaries a

stray indigo planter and that notorious punter Captain Roy, nicknamed Rob Roy in his gallant corps, the Derajat Irregulars. To play was second nature to Roy. He would sooner have attempted to win a child's halfpence at Beggar-my-neighbour than not have played at all. And as dice were held contraband on board that orderly ship, and there were no griffins to whom *écarté* could be taught, Captain Roy was obliged to content himself with 'anna' points at the skipper's economical card-table.

The male passengers had one bond of union among them. Their errand was identical. They were all going home, hoping, Antæus-like, to gain new strength by the touch of their native earth and the breath of their native air. For all were ill, more or less, and every one of them felt as if he were Prometheus, with the hot Indian sun instead of the penal vultures to prey upon his liver.

Besides the officers and the civilians who had been thrifty enough, or old-fashioned enough, to prefer the long sea voyage and its lazy comfort to the quick scrambling scurry of the overland route, there were others. A missionary, a newspaper editor, a cotton broker, three indigo planters, a Dutch lawyer from the Cape, and a Ceylon magistrate. This last-named functionary had a standing grievance against the government that paid him so poorly for the loss of his health, as compared with the ample receipts of his envied brethren who drew their salaries from Calcutta instead of the Colonial Treasury.

Besides these there were the ship's first and second officers, plain seafaring persons, whose main ambition in life was to be called captain, and have 'a cuddy of their own' on board some A 1 Indiaman. There was the ship's doctor. There were the ship's middies, two chubby, brown-faced boys, with

gilt buttons and blue cloth, who were known officially as the 'young gentlemen,' and informally as 'guinea-pigs.' The third mate was on duty, but the fourth was below. This was exquisite Chipperfield, the curled darling of the cabin, but a sorry seaman, as Captain Morris knew to his cost.

The skipper often growled at him as a Jemmy Jessamy fellow who did his work in kid gloves, who could not take a solar observation or hammer out a dead reckoning without making ludicrous blunders therein, and who could not be trusted to put the ship about twice running without missing stays. But Captain Morris was rather proud, in his secret heart, that an officer of his should be so fine a gentleman. He liked to see this gay butterfly flitting from one group of ladies to another, pleased and giving pleasure, while the sturdy Greenock men, his superiors, could scarcely grumble out a word

of polite conversation. Mr. Chipperfield wore diamond shirt-buttons, drenched his cambric handkerchief with Jockey Club perfume, and was tolerated on account of his being nephew to owners.

To arrange questions of precedence among Anglo-Indian ladies is proverbially as safe as fingering a wasp's nest. And it was a moot point whether Mrs. General Gummles, whose husband was a Companion of the Bath, or Mrs. Snelling, spouse of a Member of the Supreme Council, had a right to sit in the chiefest place of honour at the well-spread dinner-table. There was at first some risk that the feuds of the civil and military services would be renewed, for the thousandth time, on board the 'Ganges.' But, luckily, Mrs. Gummles was deaf and drowsy, and not combative except when attacked, while Captain Morris had a knack of pouring the oil of conciliation upon the troubled

waters of strife. The haughty civilian dame and the consort of the general were coaxed into a compromise, and took, as the skipper phrased it, 'turn and turn about' of social superiority. And thus the little community escaped the fate that had befallen more than one caravan of their predecessors, when half the passengers were not on speaking terms with the other half, and the civil Capulets looked carving-knives and scissor-points across the table at the military Montagues.

There were nine or ten other married ladies, most of whom were young, pale, prettyish, and lively. Four out of five were going home alone; but though their hearts were, of course, left behind them in that sultry land where their lords were still hard at work drilling, inspecting, and marching over the sweltering plains, their smiling faces and bright eyes denoted anything but absence of mind. There was little Mrs. Chatterton,

for instance, well known at picnics and balls in the merry hill-stations, and reputed as the most desperate flirt that ever cantered under male escort round the corner of 'Chacko.'

You would hardly have thought, to observe the half-timid, half-arch manner in which Mrs. C. is glancing up from under her long eyelashes at elegant Chipperfield, that her thoughts were with Chatterton in his bungalow, as they no doubt were. Poor Chatterton, he could not afford to ask for another furlough, even if the regiment could have spared the captain of its light company, and he had to borrow the necessary funds for his wife's journey to England, at thumping interest, from the Gungapatam Bank. But the doctor said she ought to go, and he could not bear to see her pretty face lose its plumpness and bloom, day after day, while the hot winds blew over the reeking tanks and crowded bazaar of the hateful Indian town,

and he would sooner have sold his commission than have kept Kitty in that pesthouse of a place. How she clung to him, and cried, and kissed him when they parted; and what a deep, heartbreaking sob it was that shook the strong man's breast as he said, with a miserable pretence of cheerfulness:

‘Only eighteen months, love, eighteen months, and they *must* give us the route for home.’

And now—well, well, Mrs. Chatterton is a flighty little thing, but she means no harm, and she is laughing in her sleeve at Chipperfield as she practises her witcheries upon him, lest her artillery should grow rusty for lack of use.

Apart from the cut-and-dried theories of French philanthropists, we never find equality between man and man: still less among woman. And as from a whole bed of blushing roses it is easy to select the one rose that is

bigger, and brighter, and sweeter than any of its fellows, so is it that our eyes instinctively discover the fairest of a company.

The belle of the cabin was showy, merry, dark-eyed Mrs. Davenport. Young as she was, an undefinable something pointed her out as a rich widow. It was not her dress. Those lilac muslins bore no resemblance to a mourning garb. St. Augustine himself could hardly have persuaded her to cover her raven hair with the hideous cap that is our British substitute for the antique Oriental custom of shaving the heads of relicts. And yet her saucy, cheery independence of bearing would have sat ill upon maid or matron. She was manifestly a rich widow, one of those whom a pedestal of gold elevates above the pinching poverty, the rubs and hardships, the forlorn feebleness of her humbler sisters in portentous headgear and rusty bombazine.

And, indeed, Mrs. Davenport was very

well off. There were stars against her name in the volumes wherein the holders of India Stock are chronicled. The books of the Old Lady of Threadneedle Street—works that should surely be written with ruby pens and golden ink on rustling bank-paper—contained the name of Fanny Davenport, owner of a large sum in Consols. She had all the cares of the world on her shoulders, that fascinating widow, as she often declared with a toss of her pretty little head. In her case those cares were Protean, taking shape as stock and scrip ; as shares in Indian railways and banks, as Assam tea and Bengal indigo, as canal debentures, as everything by which a canny, long-headed Scot, like the late proprietor of these good things, could turn a safe rupee. Also the cares of the world in this lady's case assumed the not disagreeable shape of landed property—not Indian land, not a jaghire, or a zemindarry of yellow mud tufted with

bamboo thickets, green with paddy-fields, and tilled by a cottier population of half-naked Hindoos; but a pretty estate in England, with a handsome house and gardens, as well as a snug rent-roll.

The architect of his widow's fortune had been a noted man in India—the Hon. Duff Davenport colonially honourable, of course, and not one of the noble nebulæ whose names form a minor galaxy at the end of Captain Dod's pink 'Peerage.' He was a great Don of the civil service. By dint of outliving and outwriggling his contemporaries, he had wormed his way from a writership to be Commissioner, Lieutenant-Governor, and legislator for scores of millions.

Mrs. Davenport's late husband was a representative man. He was one of those shrewd Scotsmen whom Lord Melville helped to reach the foot of the famous pagoda-tree, and very well and hard they shook it, too, in

those glorious days when India was the Caledonian's Land of Promise. Davenport is not a Scottish name, but the young magistrate—he was only a magistrate then—had changed his first patronymic, as Trapbois volunteered to run errands, for a consideration. The well-grown Lothian lad, with high cheekbones and auburn hair, had the luck to find favour with the dark-skinned heiress of old General Davenport, H.E.I.C.S., a terribly rich old heathen, who smoked hubble-bubble pipes, bastinadoed his servants, and lived more like a native Bahawder than a British officer. He had great wealth, and was always suspected to have fingered more of Tippoo's treasures than ever found their way to the prize agents. In spite of the black blood in his daughter's veins — for Mrs. General Davenport was a dingy bundle of shawls, and fat, and pearl necklaces, and was reported to have been a dancing girl—

her hand was sought by more eligible suitors than young Duff Brodie. But the little half-caste heiress had a will of her own. She married the man of her choice, and henpecked him afterwards. The 'London Gazette' gravely announced that Duff Brodie, Esq., had his Majesty's gracious permission to assume the name and arms of Davenport; the Heralds' College was the better for the transaction by some hundreds of pounds, and Duff and his wife got their money's worth in gules, or, saltires, elephants rampant, and palm-trees.

The General died. So did Duff's wife. And the Hon. Duff, very rich, very high in the service, and a childless widower, married again.

Disappointed ladies of a so-called suitable age made spiteful comments on the great civilian's folly in mating with a girl who might have been his granddaughter. He

was far on the shady side of sixty. Pretty Fanny Fletcher, the newest and sweetest importation in the Indian marriage market, was rising twenty. She chose to be an old man's darling ; and if, as people said, she sold herself, at least the purchase-money was no trifle. Mr. Davenport indulged and humoured her in everything. He had great confidence in her, somehow, and really seemed to enjoy the sensation she caused, and to be proud of the crowds of admirers that surrounded his young wife, like flies round honey. Then in eighteen months he died, and left her every pice of his savings.

Fanny Davenport was a celebrity. No one was more talked of, and yet there was no slur upon her fair fame. In spite of her 'fast' repute, her good sense had kept her out of scrapes. The veriest scandal-monger in the presidency could hardly call her a flirt. She turned the heads of scores of

foolish fellows, but her own was quite steady and quite cool. Every one in Bengal talked of her, and her nickname of 'the Dashing Davenport' was known at every mess-table and dâk-bungalow from Peshawur to Barrackpore. She was the rage, and no wonder; for besides her good looks and her high spirits, she really was bold and clever, drove and rode as well as she waltzed, talked almost as brilliantly as she sang and played, and took the lead in all companies where she cared to shine.

The widow was in no hurry to come home. She stayed a year in India to look after her affairs, for the old civilian had had a finger in every commercial pie that was likely to be remunerative, from the Himalayas to Cape Comorin. His desks and safes were full of bonds, coupons, and securities of the most miscellaneous character. His speculations, too, had been necessarily conducted

by means of agents, since it would have been a gross breach of etiquette for one in his high official position to have openly 'beared' the market that his own acts could raise or depress at pleasure. Accordingly, there were all sorts of useful friends of the departed Duff, British brokers, Hindoo dullals, Armenian or Parsee bankers, Bengalee or Bombay shroffs, who had to be coerced or cajoled into liquidating their just debts to the dead man's estate. Then, the affairs being at last wound up, with the help of a sharp firm of Calcutta lawyers, Mrs. Davenport left India. It was not the fault of Anglo-Indian bachelors that she left it as Mrs. Davenport still. But she laughed at her suitors, and openly declared that she meant to keep her liberty, and to have the spending of her own fortune. Wilful in everything, she chose to sail in the 'Ganges,' instead of going by way of Egypt. The

bustling Overland Route was not, she declared, fit for a lonely, unprotected little woman like herself.

There was only one other face in the cabin of the Indiaman that could for an instant be compared with that of sparkling Fanny Davenport. And between Blanche Morton and the fascinating widow rivalry was scarcely possible. There was the same difference between them that exists between a diamond and a pearl. Blanche was really very pretty. The sweet little face, in its soft rounded beauty, looked so formed to express happiness, that most people were sorry to see how sad it was. Everyone on board was acquainted with the main facts of her simple history. It was known that her father, an officer in a line regiment, had sold out of the army, and become a coffee-planter in Ceylon. Captain Morton had done this on succeeding to a cousin's property in that island, a much

neglected estate, the value of which rumour had probably exaggerated. Blanche was an only child. It was on her account that her father turned his back on a profession that he loved. His ambition was to make a fortune for his daughter's sake.

Like many others who aim high, Captain Morton failed in the full fruition of his hopes, but he secured a competence. The years which the family spent in the comparative solitude of a planter's life were not unhappy years to Morton and his wife. They were very happy ones to Blanche. Ceylon, a place of self-imposed exile, endured rather than relished by her parents, was her dear home. But at last the climate, that, like the flaming swords of wrathful angels, keeps watch over those tempting Edens of the tropics, did its work but too well. There was a season of unusual sickliness. Mrs. Morton died; and her husband six months later was laid beside

her. And Blanche, who had no near relations, was going to England to be placed under the care of a former friend of her father's. Mr. Orpington, her trustee, once assistant-surgeon in Captain Morton's regiment, was now in practice somewhere in Lincolnshire. To the guardianship of himself and his sisters, Blanche had been entrusted. To this new home she was on her way.

During the voyage, there was not one of the passengers who had not wished to show some kindness to the lonely girl, whose young life sorrow had darkened so early. But Blanche was timid and sad, and she shrank back from their advances. She was grateful for the good nature of her temporary companions, but their efforts at consolation did more harm than good. There are well-meaning people who never guess that their awkward kindness chafes the hurts to

which, after their injudicious fashion, they would fain minister. Grief had come to Blanche on the threshold of womanhood, just when the gorgeous hues of hope and joy should seem the fairest in the nearness of their promise. But time is a mighty healer, and in youth itself there are wondrous untried resources of strength and courage. There is a *vis medicatrix* of nature in the soul as in the body, but it is strongest with the young. Blanche Morton had yet to learn that life has its own cares and hopes and pleasures, and that hers had hardly begun.

More than one kind smile and kind word greeted the truant as she entered the cabin. Honest Captain Morris looked up from his cards, and gave her a good-humoured nod of welcome as she passed, and a 'Glad to see you, Miss Morton.' Mrs. Davenport smilingly indicated a vacant seat near her

own; but stout Mrs. Major Mulcaster, of the Bengal Artillery, a lady whose Kilmainham accent had retained its raciness through forty years of Indian service, rose from her sofa to take possession of the new comer. Miss Morton must sit by her, she protested, and must drink some hot 'tay,' which the worthy old Irishwoman had saved for her.

'Sure, me dear, you're by yourself, so we're all bound to take care of you,' said Mrs. Mulcaster, in her rich Celtic voice. The Major's wife had had daughters of her own, and her heart yearned towards poor Blanche.

The evening passed on, as such evenings pass at sea, until the warning stroke on the ship's bell sent the passengers to their state rooms.

An hour later all was hushed, and there

was no sound heard but the melancholy clang of the ship's bell as it sounded from half-hour to half-hour through the night, and the dull wash of the water as it rippled beneath the cabin windows.

CHAPTER V.

HOME.

TEN weeks later, the 'Ganges' dropped anchor off Gravesend. The great ship, that had battled her way over the waste of waters, came up to her moorings in the Thames, in custody, as it seemed, of a fussy little steam-tug. For the last time the sailors hauled briskly at tack and sheet and brace, as the pilot picked out the berth where the Indiaman was to lie. Down went the anchor with a plunge, and the sharp iron flukes bit deep into the tough ground below the river ooze. She rides safely and easily now, and the yards are

squared, and the men go scrambling up aloft to take in sail, and the snorting steam-tug is cast adrift. All's well. Hurrah!

The crew cheer unbidden and unreprieved. Indeed, the day of a ship's entry into port from a long sea voyage is a sort of salt-water Saturnalia. Every one is too sincerely glad to see land once more, for even the gruffest martinet to grudge the men their natural outburst of noisy joy. All's well.

And now the galley with the custom-house officers, and the boat of the health officer, and a shoal of shore-boats, come thronging up to the 'Ganges' as fast as oars can bring them. And there is mustering of crew and passengers, and there is calling over of names from a roll, and the ship's log is glanced at, and the ship's manifest and invoices are examined, and there is much signing and certifying, and much drawing of corks and sipping of sherry in

the cabin below, and many well-deserved compliments to Captain Morris. A clean bill of health—free pratique, and no more formalities. And now, who is for the shore?

As a general rule, everybody is for the shore, as the captain knows to his cost. The troubles of others may be at an end, but not his. Not only the passengers are eager for *terra firma*, but the sailors, too, are wild to touch dry land; wild as school-boys on the eve of their long-looked-for six weeks' holiday. Nothing but the fact that their wages are yet unpaid keeps the fore-castle Jacks, whose hearts are among the music saloons and grogshops of Ratcliff Highway, from jumping into the wherries alongside and leaving the ship to take care of herself. As it is, many a man who has been a good, useful hand in blue water, demoralized as it were by the breath of the

land wind, strikes work, and becomes an idle skulker, not worth his salt, as the mates indignantly declare. But the tawny Lascars, under their own turbaned Serang, with the creese in his girdle, are more docile now than when at sea. England is no home to them, and they earn their mess of rice by toiling lustily to drag up the passengers' luggage from the depths of the dark hold below.

In the midst of clamour, noise, and confusion, the camphor-trunks, the tin-cases, the wonderful chests constructed by Chinese carpenters, and painted over with gaudy colours, are got up on deck, and a few shivering Ayahs in clinging robes of blue cotton, and a few shawled whiskerandoes of the bearer class, pierced to the bone by the damp chill of the English climate, wrangle over the sahib's sword-case and the mem sahib's dress-box, and so forth. And the

custom-house gentry are knee-deep in carved ivory, and sandal-wood, and kincob scarfs, and queer musky packages of miscellaneous curiosities from the East. Every one is eager to get ashore before the short November day—it is the end of November now—comes quite to a close.

The passengers and their effects were all ready for the shore while yet a pale gleam, a watery radiance that told of a sun vainly struggling with the thick grey clouds, lingered in the western sky. Then with much handshaking and many an outspoken farewell, the little society broke up for ever. The intimacies that had been contracted on board ship were to be ruptured at once and utterly. Good-by to dear old Captain Morris, good-by to honest Mrs. Mulcaster, to lively Mrs. Chatterton, to exquisite Chipperfield, to all the company. And dark-eyed Mrs. Davenport, with her

Ayah, and her Mahomedan man-servant in the striped turban, and her European maid, and her voluminous baggage, and gentle Blanche Morton, under her queenly charge, is rowed away from the ship, amid lifted hats and a cheer from some of the remaining passengers and the men at the gangway. For beauty, like royal blood, has its privileges; and the men of the 'Ganges' felt as though it were a distinction and a thing to be envied that so fashionable and handsome a woman should have been a passenger on board their vessel.

A bag-full of letters, as usual, had been brought off from the Gravesend Post Office to the newly arrived Indiaman; and among these letters there were two for Blanche, addressed under cover to Captain Morris. The first of these was from her late father's London agents, announcing that Mr. John Orpington had formally accepted the trust

of Miss Morton's fortune, and the guardianship that went along with the trust. The second was signed Bridget Orpington, and was very short, and very much to the purpose. It merely informed Miss Morton that her friends at Whiteparish were expecting her arrival; expressed, very curtly, the writer's regrets that her brother's professional duties would prevent his going to London to meet his ward; and indicated a particular train by which it would be best that Blanche should travel to Danethorpe, where a carriage should await her, on the receipt of a telegram to announce her coming.

Miss Orpington's letter appeared to have been penned under the conviction that nothing could, ought, or should prevent Blanche from being at the London terminus of that railway which she named at 10.45 A.M. And had the Indiaman come to her moorings after dark, it is possible that such

punctuality might have been within Miss Morton's power. But, as it was, she could not be the only lady left to pass the night on board; nor had she a single friend in London whose house could receive her. In this difficulty, Mrs. Davenport's arbitrary good-nature came in like a good fairy to set matters straight. Her own apartments were long since bespoken at a very quiet and very expensive West-end hotel. Blanche should go with her, and she promised to see her young friend safe into a railway carriage on the following morning. And thus it was that Blanche was at Mrs. Davenport's side, in the sternsheets of the boat, as the waterman cast off from the ship, and pulled for shore.

Poor little Blanche! it was all new and strange to her—strange and very sad. It was but a cold welcome that England gave to her returning children. There was a grey sky

overhead, a grey haze of fog over the turbid river, lifting here so as to show the towering masts of a tall ship, clinging closely, elsewhere, to the muddy water of the ebb-tide. Through this haze the big black barges, the clumsy hoys, the deep-laden lighters, with hay, or sacks of coal, or corn, or hides, piled half-mast high, loomed like uncouth marine monsters. The lights on board the vessels shone yellow through the fog. Small noisy tug-boats, puffing out volumes of the blackest smoke from their short rusty funnels, panted up and down the stream, like ugly water-fiends in search of prey. The low-lying Essex shore was only defined by a lighted window or two in distant farm-houses, and even the Kentish bank lay bare and bleak, an olive-tinted mass of uninviting earth.

Nearer and nearer yet seemed the darkling coast, above which, like giant skeletons, rose the long bare arms of the windmills that

studded the low hills, and there was a blot of dusky smoke and flaring light, through which roof-tops and chimney-stacks rose blackly: this was the town. Then a structure of weed-grown piles and dank woodwork rising gauntly out of the muddy water: that was the pier. Then they were ashore, and soon a carriage was whirling through the streets, and the railway station was reached, and Blanche had time to look about her and form her first impressions of England and of home. But it was all very sad and strange. The clammy cold that made her shudder under her wraps—the dim thick atmosphere through which the gas-lamps flared so luridly, the dingy houses of weather-stained brick, so sad of aspect when compared to the fair white chunam walls of a Ceylon dwelling, with its rose-trellised verandahs and flat roof gay with creeping plants, were singularly depressing to a novice. Blanche tried in

vain to persuade herself that she ought to feel real pleasure in touching her native soil. For, after all, this was England, the dear old country, of which the name had never been pronounced in her hearing otherwise than with affection and regret. Her father and mother had loved England well. It was for her sake that they had gone into banishment amid the treacherous beauty of the far-off Indian isle where they had closed their eyes at last. How often had Blanche listened to her father's hopeful projects—for Captain Morton had been a sanguine man—for a speedy return and a prosperous life at home.

Home?—the very ship on board of which she had been so miserable was regretted now. Compared with this first experience of her forgotten native country, the 'Ganges' was homelike. But the landing at Gravesend, the short railway journey to London, the long bewildering drive through London

streets between the terminus and Mrs. Davenport's hotel, these often came back to Blanche's memory in after years as fragments of a ghastly dream. Everything was so very new, and unexpected, and disheartening, at least, to a poor little girl, brought up in seclusion, and whom Death had robbed thus early of all who cared for her. The mud, the fog, the drizzle of rain that began to descend as they jolted through the network of streets, these were not calculated to raise the spirits. London, Blanche thought, was a gloomy-looking place, fearful in its vastness, oppressive in its grim ugliness. She shuddered at the long lines of closed shop-fronts, the long line of street lamps winking through their halos of misty vapour, the slimy pavement, the slippery stones, over which the horses stumbled and slid, amidst a crash of wheels and a Babel of voices. Home?

Even the sounds of her native language,

spoken now on every side of her, jarred painfully on the ear of the returning exile. Blanche had been used to hear English only from the lips of educated persons; it was to her as a literary language. The hoarse shouts that reached her now, the strange oaths and half-intelligible utterances of porters, cabmen, street loungers, all the motley throng of London, sounded to her as strange and horrible as the goblin voices that haunt the sick-bed of the delirious wretch. How the gas glared in open stalls and booths as they went by, flinging its broad blotches of yellow light on the staring red and white of the masses of raw meat exposed for sale—on the men and women quarrelling noisily around the half-open door of the brilliantly-illuminated gin-palace—on the uncouth forms, scarcely human in garb, or mien, or speech, that prowl abroad after dark like nocturnal animals, Yahoos of the richest city in the world.

It was a terrible scene to Blanche. It is a terrible scene to all whose perceptions are not blunted by use or dullness, and whose hearts are not crusted over by a comfortable armour of selfishness, that Fuseli-like panorama which London displays nightly to all who care to look. Miss Morton was very glad indeed when the hotel was gained, and there was an end of ugly sights and unpleasant sounds, for one night at least. And, after all, she was not to live in London. Her lot was to be cast afar off, amid the peace and innocence of the country, and under the roof of good people; for had not her dear father spoken often and warmly in praise of John Orpington?

‘How pale you are, child. You had better go early to bed,’ said Mrs. Davenport, very kindly, as by the help of the six tall wax-lights, with which the obsequious head-waiter

had insisted on supplementing the gas of the chandelier, she noticed how very white and weary was the young face of her companion. And so the first day on British ground came to a close.

CHAPTER VI.

THROUGH THE FOG.

‘WE must be frightfully early to-morrow, you know,’ Mrs. Davenport had said. But early rising is a necessity of life to even the cream of Anglo-Indian society. To be up at dawn, while the drowsy servants were creeping about to prepare coffee, and the syces were saddling the horses, had been an everyday affair for years with Fanny Davenport. That ride at dawn, on a mettled little Arab horse, while the air was yet cool, and there was ice on the pools and rime on the rank jungle grass, is the talisman whereby wise fair ones in India gain health to endure

the long, listless hours of the scorching day. In undertaking to see her young friend into a railway carriage, in good time for the train which Miss Orpington's letter had indicated, Mrs. Davenport did not contemplate any extraordinary sacrifice of her personal comfort.

But it was a melancholy meal, after all, that breakfast by candlelight, on the raw winter's morning, in the London hotel. One of those fogs that turn day into night, a true town-made fog, was in possession of the metropolis of England. Yellow, and black, and opaque, the heavy vapour floated lazily through the dim thoroughfares, like foul steam from a witch's cauldron. The street in which Mrs. Davenport's fashionable caravanserai stood, was not a wide one, but for all that the keenest eye could not discern whether it were a street at all, or a terrace fronting infinite space. The opposite houses were as utterly invisible as if the earth had

devoured them. A fog indeed ! It was so dark indoors, that Mayfair might have been Pompeii, and Belgravia Herculaneum, wrapped in the threatening blackness that preceded the lava-flood and the thunderstorm. The very candles, choked, so to speak, by the thick air, burned feebly. The sounds of wheels and of shouting voices came with a muffled sound from afar off. Breakfast, under these circumstances, was a mockery. The first meal of the day is seldom very genial within metropolitan limits, but on such a morning to be hungry would have been to be out of tune with nature. All vitality seemed depressed under that stifling pall. It was sufficiently strange and unnatural to hear the shrill voice of the clock on the chimney-piece chiming the hours, protesting, as it were, against the sullen reign of night without. Mrs. Davenport's maid came in presently with awful croakings and sinister

predictions of what must happen, if her lady held to her plan of going to the terminus through such a fog.

The penny steamboats on the river, according to the maid's report, had ceased running, the greater part of the omnibuses had given up the attempt to traverse the roads—there had been a score of collisions in the main streets, and linkmen were abroad guiding passengers, step by step, over the bridges and through the narrower thoroughfares. The gas was lit everywhere, but accidents were continual. It was really very dangerous to venture out. Mr. Vokes, the neighbouring liveryman, from whose yard the carriage which Mrs. Davenport had ordered was to come, had sent round to inquire whether the lady did not prefer to countermand that vehicle for the present. But the dashing Davenport preferred nothing of the sort. She was used to receive warnings, and

to disregard them, and she rightly attributed the caution of Mr. Vokes to a natural anxiety for the safety of his carriage panels.

‘Still, if you would rather not go, dear, I should very much like to keep you with me for another day or two. Do you think Miss Orpington would object?’ said Fanny Davenport, hesitating for Blanche’s sake. But Blanche pleaded to go. It was not, she said with perfect truth, that she would not much rather stay with her kind friend in London for another day, but Miss Orpington seemed to expect her so confidently, and to regard her coming at the hour indicated as such a matter of course, that Blanche felt she *must* go.

‘Still,’ she added, in rather a faltering voice, ‘if it really was dangerous to pass through the streets, she could not bear the idea of taking Mrs. Davenport from home on such a day. She could—could go by her-

self.' And she tried to speak composedly and to look courageous, though the words almost choked her, for Blanche was not brave, and it is doubtful whether she did not entertain more alarm of the porters and ticket-clerks, and all the unaccustomed bustle of a railway journey, than of any bodily peril that might accrue in the event of a street accident.

Mrs. Davenport laughed and rang the bell.

'If there's anything to be faced, which I don't for a moment believe, we'll face it together,' she said, in her light-hearted way. 'You cannot think how they used to try and frighten me among the hills in India. I should have lost half my fun, and half the sketches in my book, if I had believed in all the inaccessible passes, snows, bears, Dacoits, and man-eating tigers, with which they tried to scare me, as little children are scared by

bogies in the nursery. It's all nonsense, of course.'

And when the waiter entered she gave orders that the carriage should be brought round half-an-hour earlier than the time first mentioned, since, no doubt, it would be necessary to drive slowly towards the east end, where the railway terminus was situated. It was evident to the experienced ear of the waiter that a lady customer who spoke in so clear and ringing a voice as that of Mrs. Davenport meant to be obeyed. Accordingly, the final decision was carried round to Mr. Vokes, at the Mews, and that individual proceeded to make the best, as he phrased it, of a bad job.

'Take the green clarence, No. 6. Take the break harness, not the plated—the plain. And just clap the collar on the old flea-bitten grey and the brown mare—the old Roman-nosed mare, stupid; not the little

'un—if there *is* a smash, it won't so much signify, and the lady's good for a fifty pun' note, no doubt. Jem, look sharp!

And Jem, grumblingly induing himself in his drab box-coat, climbed into the driving seat as the helpers buckled the last straps of the harness, and groped his dubious way out of the yard.

'If we get back all right, it's a mercy!' was Jem's farewell speech to his brethren in top-boots as he did his master's bidding.

A very curious drive it was from the hotel to the distant railway station. Mrs. Davenport had rather cruelly taken Hussein Ali, her turbaned servitor, on the box, to make him useful, as she said, at the terminus; and that Oriental, blue with the cold, was excessively alarmed at the probability of a collision with some of the vans or omnibuses that now and then loomed gigantic through the mist, the drivers appearing to be perched up aloft

like so many demons riding on the dense vapour. For, in spite of the spice of truth in the report that had been made to Mrs. Davenport by her wonder-loving maid, the traffic of London was but partially suspended.

A curious drive indeed. The carriage could seldom proceed save at a foot's pace, the very horses snorting and trembling as their iron-shod feet slipped to and fro on the slimy stones, and the coachman growling out vague curses, as he clutched the reins tight and strained his eyes and ears to make out the signs of any coming danger. Such fears were not wholly gratuitous. Every now and then, from the dark veil of the fog there would come a crash and a cry, the sound of breaking wood, and stamping horses, and angry altercation, and oaths, threats, advice, warnings, culminating in the authoritative interference of the police, and the dragging

away of some disabled vehicle to the green-yard. At every repetition of such sounds, Hussein Ali, on the box of the hired clarence, would turn bluer than before, and roll his glistening eyeballs in terror, and invoke the holy Imaums, and the blessed Omar, and the Prophet himself, and would chatter his teeth so as to bring down upon him the contempt of the bluff Jehu beside him, himself by no means at ease. Hussein Ali had been to London before with other sahibs, and out in a fog too, but never in such an unblest fog as this, thick and impenetrable as if it rose from Jehanum itself, and he quaked accordingly.

But Mrs. Davenport's spirits seemed to rise as if the novelty of the scene amused her. Perhaps it did. Novelty of almost any sort was agreeable to the bewitching Fanny. And she may also have had a good-natured desire to cheer up her timid young

friend, which combined with her habitual lightness of heart to make her talk incessantly. To talk was easy enough, since the roar of London was perforce hushed down into a deep hollow booming sound, like the notes of a great drum beating slowly and with feeble taps, while the rest of the orchestra is mute.

‘Then you don’t know these people at all—the people among whom you are going, I mean?’ asked Mrs. Davenport. Then, without waiting for Blanche’s reply, she went on, ‘But of course you don’t, or Miss What’s-her-name—Opie—Orpington—would not have written that stiff note you showed me. Have you any idea as to what sort of people they are—these Orpingtons?’

‘No,’ said poor little Blanche, with rather a blank look; ‘I never heard much about them. Poor papa,’ and here her eyes filled with tears, and her voice trembled, for she

had not yet learned to speak his name without agitation—‘Papa had a great respect for Mr. Orpington, and that is all I know of the family. They were in the same regiment, my dear father and Mr. Orpington, but that was years ago, before papa exchanged into the Fusiliers. They sometimes wrote to one another. I found some of Mr. Orpington’s letters, when—when—’

Here her voice quite failed her, and she preferred to turn her face from her companion and to gaze out at the thick fog, in colour like nothing earthly but the stock of ill-made pea-soup, or the uniforms of such volunteer corps as proved docile to the siren suggestions of the War Office with respect to the tint of their martial garb.

Mrs. Davenport had too much tact to take any notice of her friend’s emotion. She turned the conversation to herself and her own plans and projects; and Blanche,

who was grateful for her companion's kindness, and to whom it was a relief to have her thoughts diverted from the great sorrow and the dreary isolation of her own young life, listened very willingly.

The widow had insisted that Blanche should promise to come and stay with her when she had 'a roof of her own over her head,' and Miss Morton was glad enough to accept the invitation, subject, of course, to her guardian's approval.

'But shall you live in London?' asked Blanche, with an involuntary shudder as she glanced out at what London then was.

It is very difficult to divest ourselves of first impressions concerning a place—very hard to believe that the sun can ever brighten up a scene that our memories associate only with dark skies and splashing rain; and London looked like a penal settlement indeed on that winter's morning. The fog

seemed to get worse rather than better. The street-lamps were alight; the gas was flaring within the shops and offices; candles twinkled weakly through upper windows; red smoky links were dancing erratically about, like so many will-o'-the-wisps, carried by shouting boys and men, who were ever noisily volunteering to pioneer some nervous passenger or cautious coachman past a dangerous crossing or ugly lock of carriages. Those who prowled through the gloomy streets were seldom wholly visible at one time, so that here a hat, and there a head without a body, and elsewhere limbs without body or head, appeared in ghastly incongruity against a background of vapour. There was whipping and sharp reining-up of the reeking, terrified horses; there was grinding of wheels, and scraping of wood-work; there were hoarse words of command suddenly bawled forth by men in blue with bull's-eye lan-

terns and glazed hats; and the whole journey was a Walpurgis sort of affair, not recommendatory of Babylon the Greatest as a place of residence. The slow pace, the lugubrious prospect, the doleful noises, had all of them something of a funereal character that would have saddened one who had more cause for elation than poor Blanche.

‘In London? Yes and no. In the season there’s nothing like it; but to live in London out of season, *merci!* I shall leave that to the few spare millions who stay here when everybody is out of town,’ said Mrs. Davenport cheerily. ‘You must not suppose, though, that London always looks like this. It is a wretched day, even for the first of December, and in May and June, still more in July, you may sometimes look up and see a blue sky overhead even in the Strand. No, I must go down next week into Somersetshire. I haven’t seen my landed property

yet, the estate my poor dear old Duff bought but six months before he left me. He hoped to live there, poor good man;’ and Mrs. Davenport’s voice softened, as it always did when she spoke of the late Lieutenant-Governor, and in this there was not the smallest affectation. Her marriage had not been a love match. She herself would have been the first to ridicule the idea of a romantic feeling between a girl such as she was and a grey-haired senior like her late husband. But if she did not love the Hon. Duff Davenport, it is very sure that she loved no one else. The old man had been very kind. He had indulged her, but that was not all: he had trusted her, and his wife had had brains enough, and feminine chivalry enough, to feel the compliment of his confidence, and to be proud of it. Mercenary matches are not good things, doubtless, but in this case the bargain on both sides had been honestly,

even generously performed, with good measure, heaped up and running over.

‘Somersetshire, that is a long long way off from where I shall be. It is prettier than Lincolnshire, is it not?’ said Blanche.

‘You must come to West Combe and judge for yourself,’ returned the widow. ‘The sketch of the house and grounds which the lawyers sent out to India was a tempting one: grand old oaks and an Elizabethan manor-house, and that sort of thing, among the most breakneck hills, with a mill-stream running through orchards in the valley below. The Saxons named Somersetshire “the pleasant county,” so the Bishop of Simla used to say. He ought to know, for he had a chapel-of-ease at Weston, or Clifton, or somewhere, before they sent him out to us. I never was west of Oxford, I believe. I was there at one Commemoration, the year my cousin Harry took his degree.’

And here Mrs. Davenport gave a little sigh as the recollection of that pleasant holiday, the quadrangles of the stately old colleges, gay with flaunting parasols and fluttering muslins, the river crowded with boats, the contagious merriment of a multitude of young people of both sexes, rose before her. She had been an imaginative young girl then, and had fancied herself in love with cousin Harry, who was a good-looking, round-faced young man, with just intellect enough to land himself at the tail of the second class, after many months of assiduous grinding under the eye of a private tutor. But that had been a mere passing fancy, the shadow of a girl's fitful inclination; and when Mrs. Davenport, out in India, had heard of her cousin's marriage, she had felt no pang at the news, and had sent sincere congratulations and some costly presents for the bride.

‘The year my cousin Harry took his degree,’ she repeated; ‘how long ago that seems. How little I thought then that I should ever own a country-house in England. I believe I am the first of the Fletchers who ever got, in the way of proprietorship, beyond a villa at Putney or Highgate. I wonder if I shall find it dull work, living in my own manor-house, seeing no land out of the windows but what belongs to me, playing Lady Bountiful to my own villagers, killing my own mutton. No, I don’t quite think I could kill my own mutton.’

And at this last illustration of the duties of a landowner, Fanny Davenport laughed so heartily, that Blanche could not but laugh too, and agree that her friend could scarcely be expected to kill her own mutton.

‘Still—it’s very wrong, but do you know, I almost envy you. My own prospects seem so different,’ said Blanche, after a pause.

‘Oh, I don’t know that,’ observed Mrs. Davenport, in the benevolent wish to cheer up her lonely little companion; ‘I’m sure I don’t see why. You’ll find these Orpingtons rather slow, perhaps, but you must rub the rust off, and make them trot you out—I don’t mean just directly, of course—at watering-places and county assemblies. What is he—this phoenix of a guardian—a major, or something?’

Blanche shook her head.

‘Mr. Orpington is a doctor,’ she replied. ‘I have heard, I think, that he is not very rich. I do not expect life at Whiteparish to be very exciting.’

‘Then, when you find it too dull, you must look up your friends,’ said Mrs. Davenport encouragingly; ‘I mean to see a great deal of you, unless you throw me over, and I shall expect you to come to me in May. Yes, I’m sure to be in town by May at the latest. I

would ask you to West Combe, only I know you would be moped there just yet. I don't know a soul in Somersetshire, and county people are as tardy in recognizing a new resident, as kings in recognizing a new government. They will talk me over, and ogle me across the pews in church, and nibble around me a good deal, before they call upon me. Tiresome that, after India. You must write me word, Blanche, how you like your new abode.'

'I don't believe I shall like it at all. The nearer I get to it the more I seem to dislike it, and to shrink from it. It's very wrong, and very silly, I know—but I wish—I *wish* I were not going to Whiteparish. I feel as if—'

And here Blanche stopped short, and seemed sorry that she had spoken. She was trembling, and her face was very pale.

'As if what? Tell me, darling!' said Mrs.

Davenport, as she bent to kiss her cold cheek, and took Blanche's hand caressingly between her own.

‘As if evil would come of it; as if my fate were waiting for me, there, in that house;’ Blanche answered, shudderingly. ‘Please, dearest Mrs. Davenport, don't question me just now. Don't ask me any more. I dare say it's superstitious, silly, even wicked—for did not dear papa, who loved me so well, choose wholly for my good? But I can't help it. I feel the horror strong upon me now. Pray let me be still for a little while.’

And Blanche turned her white face towards the window, and looked out at the grim sights faintly visible through the dim glass, at the rolling fog, and the lights that fought with it, and the half-seen shapes that appeared for an instant amidst the wreaths of vapour, and were presently swallowed up.

Mrs. Davenport talked on, but she wisely

spared her companion any comment on her agitation. 'The little thing is tired and frightened, and no wonder,' she thought. 'Don't I, too, know what it is to be sent away from home, to live among strangers? And yet when I was packed off to India I went to a relation, at least, a dear second cousin that I had never seen. And I was never so timid as this girl, worse luck for her, poor dear. I wish she were a sister of mine. I wonder whether these Orpingtons will treat her well.'

But while these thoughts were passing through Mrs. Davenport's mind, she gave no hint of them, but rattled on concerning future agreeable plans and pleasures in store, in all of which she managed to make Blanche a prospective sharer, until at last she exclaimed, 'Ah, here is the station. Ten minutes to spare, too! We shall do famously now. Hussein Ali, idhar aou! open the door.'

Call the porters, can't you! Who is that?—surely it's a face I know—the tall man with a fair moustache. I ought to know him. Captain Wyvil!

Captain Wyvil took off his hat.

'Mrs. Davenport! I had no idea you were in England. So glad to see you! Can I be of any use here?'

'*Cela dépend,*' said the widow, smiling. 'Are you going down the line to-day, Captain Wyvil; and if so, where to?'

'Danethorpe,' was the answer. 'I'm going to stay with an old uncle of mine who lives in that part of the world. Can I be fortunate enough to have you for a fellow-traveller, Mrs. Davenport?'

'Not to-day,' answered the relict of the Hon. Duff; 'but Miss Morton is going to Danethorpe, too. If you can save her any trouble on the way, I shall be much obliged to you. Hussein Ali, get Miss Morton's

ticket—look after the luggage—jalde jaou, will you—instead of mooning there.’

For that turbaned attendant was salaaming, and bowing, and grinning recognition to the captain, whom he had known well enough in India.

Presently Blanche had taken leave of her friend, and was whirling rapidly along in the central compartment of a first-class carriage, the other occupants of which were an elderly clergyman, his deaf wife, and Captain Wyvil. Mrs. Davenport had found time to tell Blanche that Hugh Wyvil had been one of the most popular men in his regiment, when she had known him in Bengal, and had won much praise and the Victoria Cross during the mutiny.

‘He was a Plunger, then, you see. Now he’s a Guardsman. He’s heir to his uncle, Sir Phœbus, and——But here he comes.’

There was not much said for the first few

miles, and until the train had got beyond the London fog. The captain was the first to speak.

‘Going to Mr. Orpington’s house? I know him—by report, at least. An honest man, but a very rough diamond. Excuse me, Miss Morton, for mentioning a relation of yours so cavalierly,’ said her soldierly fellow-traveller to Blanche, when he heard whither she was bound.

‘Mr. Orpington is not a relation. I never saw him,’ returned Blanche.

‘Ah, well! He’s a great friend of my uncle’s. That is, I believe, my uncle puts a deal of confidence in him, and that sort of thing.’

He was not a disagreeable fellow-traveller, this fair-haired officer, with the bronzed face and the pleasant smile. Blanche, timid as she was, was not in the least afraid of him. And when the girl’s first shyness wore off,

these two chatted together so cheerily, that Blanche was quite surprised at the flight of time when the train stopped, and the guard called out that it was Danethorpe station.

The telegram for which Miss Orpington had stipulated had been duly despatched the day before, and a fly was in readiness to convey Miss Morton to Whiteparish. A dog-cart was there also, drawn by a tall, weedy bay horse, and driven by a groom, who came forward and touched his hat at sight of Captain Wyvil. The way from Danethorpe to Deepdene was not the same as that which led to Whiteparish, and as the fly rumbled off with poor Blanche and her trunks, the young soldier stood watching that frowsy equipage till the pollard willows of the hedge hid it from his view. Then he lit his cigar and proceeded to rattle off towards the hills among which his uncle's mansion lay, at

as brisk a pace as the wiry old horse was capable of. He wondered, as he went, at the pertinacity with which his thoughts seemed to follow a little brown-haired girl whom he should probably never see again. The idea that he should never see her again was not one that pleased him.

And Blanche——the warp and weft of her thoughts were mingled in sad confusion, but there was more of shadow than of sunshine in her daydream. She thought much and gratefully of the kind friend whom she had left on the railway platform, half discernible through the London fog, and a little, perhaps, of the handsome young guardsman who had been her fellow-traveller for a few hours. But more than all the rest were her thoughts busy with vague doubts and anticipations concerning the unknown life in store for her, the home that awaited her in Whiteparish, the strangers whose roof was to be her

shelter. And for this unknown life, this untried home, this family of strangers, she entertained a shadowy and formless dread, an unreasoning fear, already; and though she blamed herself, she could not shake off the feeling. Nearer and nearer, as she drew to the place of her destination, the more this feeling seemed to deepen, and Blanche Morton's heart was very heavy when the straggling village came in sight, and the fly came to a dead stop in front of Mr. Orpington's house. This, then, was her new home.

CHAPTER VII.

THE NEW HOME.

THE surgeon's door was opened by a red-haired servant-maid, with a grey shawl, such as women wear in Lancashire and West Yorkshire, drawn over her head like a hood. As Blanche stepped across the threshold she hesitated, and a slight shiver ran through her veins, as if she had encountered the chill, unwholesome air of a vault. A momentary sensation of faintness, a shuddering horror, such as children sometimes feel when alone in the dark, came over her with overpowering force. It was not that the exterior of the dwelling was mean and unlovely. It was not that all around spoke of penury and neglect. True,

the house was melancholy, the situation bleak, and the appearance of the sturdy Yorkshire serving-maid, with her bare arms and hard, dull face, was not prepossessing.

These, however, were not the causes of the shapeless terror that seemed to warn Blanche back from the threshold of her guardian's abode. That terror had made itself felt long before her eyes had rested on the long, low frontage of the white house, on the weather-beaten door, and on the small paned windows, around which the rose-creepers, once heedfully trained and tended, now clung mouldering, dead, and black, to the rusty nails that sustained them, like malefactors on a gibbet. She tried to shake off the impulse, tried to smile, and did her best to speak pleasantly to the rough portress who stood eyeing her with a sullen, half-inquisitive scrutiny.

'The Miss Orpingtons expect me. Are they at home now?' said Blanche.

‘T’ laadies be in paarlour. Ye can coom in,’ was the reply, uttered in the broadest accent of the speaker’s native province. And Blanche followed the woman across the brick-paved entrance, and was admitted into the ancient house-place, and into the presence of John Orpington’s sisters. The door was closed.

Blanche, with her veil lifted, came forward into the room with a faltering step and wistful eyes, before which the quaint apartment, the shabby furniture, the two gaunt women, the flickering fire in the narrow grate, seemed to swim. Poor Blanche! she saw them through the rising tears that would not be kept back—she had the sense of her orphanhood so heavily upon her as she came in to take her place beside a stranger’s hearth. It would have been a moment of pain and of awkwardness to many a hardier nature than hers. But it was also a moment in which

the stricken young heart would have responded to kindness, as the desert rock to the touch of the sacred wand. One gentle word, one sign of sympathy, on the part of her new unknown friends, and the regard of the grateful girl would have been theirs for life. But she heard no such word; she saw no such sign.

There was neither pity nor tenderness in the harsh-featured faces of the two tall and bony women in whose presence she stood trembling. One of the spinster sisters, the one who wore a gown of black woollen, sombre enough and plain enough to have been a nun's robe, retained her seat beside the fireplace, where she sat knitting as usual. This was Bridget Orpington, and the writer of the dry letter which had instructed Blanche as to her journey. Blanche noticed what a stern face it was—that of the surgeon's elder sister—with its thin lips and

beetling brows, and how the grizzled hair, coarse as a horse's mane, hung in iron-grey curls around the temples. Miss Orpington thrust out her mittened hand by way of welcome to the newcomer.

'How do you do?' was her outspoken greeting; and the commonplace words were uttered in a tone of frigid indifference.

Mr. Peters, the curate, who was an occasional visitor, was used to say that Miss Orpington was a philosopher. If so, her school was a compound one, something between those of the Cynics and the Stoics. But she had never been known, even for the sake of money, which she dearly loved, to feign a feeling which she did not possess. Her father had often declared that Bridget drove away his customers by her disagreeable downrightness of speech, whereas Barbara could flatter, and fawn, and give smooth answers, whenever smoothness was a market-

able quality. And Barbara came forward now, rustling in her dyed silks, with cheap bracelets rattling on her big-boned wrist, as she held out her hand to Blanche, with her curls glossy as unguents could make them, and with a tripping tread and a false smile, and an assumption of juvenile vivacity that was at once absurd and hideous.

‘How are you, Blanche? Very happy to make your acquaintance. Give me a kiss, my dear!’ And as she spoke, she bent her head, and mincingly put her bony face down to that of Blanche to receive the suggested caress. But though Blanche took the red, knuckled hand, she could not bring herself to press her lips to that forbidding face with the high cheek-bones, and the treacherous mouth, and the cold eyes. She shrank back from the proffered embrace, murmuring some words in reply to Miss Barbara’s greeting. Grim Barbara was not slow to remark and to

resent the girl's instinctive repugnance, and an evil light came into her pale eyes, and her cruel mouth tightened itself ominously, as she tossed back her head and released Blanche's hand.

'Won't you sit down? You seem cold,' said Miss Barbara, with a sneer in her voice, and she pointed to a chair near the fire.

Blanche timidly complied with the request, or command—it sounded more like the last than the first—to be seated.

'Tired with your journey?' curtly demanded the elder spinster.

'No—yes—a little,' replied Blanche, scarcely knowing what she said.

Then came a pause, only broken by the click of Miss Orpington's knitting-needles, and by the heavy tread and grumbling voice of the fly-driver, as he carried Blanche's trunks upstairs.

‘You look very young; sixteen, arn’t you?’ asked Miss Barbara.

‘I shall be eighteen in May,’ returned Blanche; and then there was another pause.

‘Hungry after your journey?’ inquired the elder spinster, with an extra click of the rapid needles.

‘No—thank you—no,’ said Blanche, half alarmed by the abruptness of the question.

‘We may as well begin,’ said Miss Orpington, with dry deliberation—‘as well begin as we are to go on. We are plain people, and our habits are early and regular habits. It is quite out of the question that we, at our time of life, should alter our ways to suit the ways of a person so much younger than ourselves.’

Here Barbara gave an impatient sniff, for her age was a sore subject with Barbara; but her senior paid no heed to this inarticulate commentary, but calmly resumed:

‘It is the duty of the young to conform to the wishes and opinions of their elders, and the sooner you learn our fashions the better. We keep early hours: eight o’clock breakfast in winter, half-an-hour sooner in summer; and we always dine at one to suit my brother’s engagements. Of course, dinner is over for to-day; but you shall have some cold meat, or something else if you prefer it, at tea-time. If you had been hungry, you could have had something to eat now. But, as a rule, meals must be regular.’

And, having developed this cast-iron theory of hospitality, Miss Orpington went serenely on with her knitting.

Poor little Blanche! she looked almost despairingly at these two grim women, to whose keeping she seemed to have been delivered up. The very idea of passing much of her life, weeks, months, and years, in their company, seemed unnatural in its leaden

weight. Weeks, months, years! How slowly the minutes dragged by. There was a yellow-faced American clock among the conch-shells and blue and orange shepherdesses on the chimney-piece, and this clock seemed to be ticking in dismal concert with the small sharp rattle of Miss Orpington's knitting needles. It was fast getting dark, and Blanche could hardly distinguish the hands as they crawled over the dial-plate; but the tortoise in the fable surely moved less sluggishly than they did. Little more than half-an-hour had elapsed since Blanche entered her guardian's house, but for tedious monotony the time might have been an *Æon* of ages.

Then she took herself to task for her ingratitude. She had no right, she told herself, to feel disappointed because Mr. Orpington's sisters differed somewhat in look and manners from her former friends. No doubt

they were excellent persons. She should learn to like them very much by-and-by. And she remembered how warmly she had heard her dear dead father speak in John Orpington's praise. She forced herself, as it were, to dwell on the subject of her guardian's great merits. She had not seen him yet—but he would soon come home. He was her father's old friend. He would be glad to see her under his roof. Blanche found herself laying great stress on this point, because, half unconsciously, she had imbibed a conviction that the Misses Orpington were *not* glad to see her. Perhaps they did not like strange faces. She would be patient, and wait. It should not be her fault if they did not like her better after a while. Perhaps—

Her thoughts were interrupted by Miss Orpington's deep voice.

'You had better take the child to her room, sister Barbara. She cannot sit all day

in her travelling things,' said the deep voice.

Blanche rose obedient. Miss Barbara resumed her sprightly air as she came forward and passed her long lean arm through that of Blanche, and so led her away. Blanche did her best not to shrink, this time, from her new friend's demonstrative affection, and in custody of Miss Barbara she traversed the brick-paved entrance, and ascended the steep stairs. Very steep and narrow were those stairs, and the landing-place above looked disproportionably broad from sheer force of contrast. Two long passages branched off from this landing-place, and down one of these Miss Barbara turned.

'Mind you don't stumble, child!' said the surgeon's sister; and the caution was not unnecessary, for the bare boards were uneven and loose, and the passage was so dark, that Blanche could hardly distinguish the small

doors, whose paint gleamed white against the yellow walls. There seemed to be a good many rooms. Evidently the house had been built to accommodate more inmates than it contained during the occupancy of its present master.

‘This is where you’re to sleep,’ said Miss Barbara, jerking open a door, about midway down this gloomy corridor. ‘Why, Margaret, haven’t you got Miss Morton’s room to rights yet?’

‘It be pretty nigh fettled oop now, Miss,’ was the answer. And with a parting whisk of her broom, and a rough push to a couple of stray chairs, Margaret departed

‘She’s a useful creature—does a deal of work. Lincolnshire servants don’t work like Yorkshire women,’ said Miss Barbara, and then added, smirkingly, ‘How do you like your room, dear?’

The question was one that hardly admitted

of an answer at once truthful and conciliatory. Under the most favourable circumstances, the small mean chamber, with its northern aspect, its scanty furniture, the meagre strip of white curtain beside its solitary casement, the meagre strip of threadbare carpet that formed an oblong oasis in the midst of a dreary desert of worm-eaten boards, would not have looked to advantage. But seen through a cloud of dust, in the chilly twilight of the last evening, in bleak November, with no one article of furniture in its proper place, and with the skimped curtains of the little bed pinned tightly across from side to side, the room was as comfortless a room as any in the shire. From the rusty bars of the cold grate to the cheap looking-glass that hung from a nail—a glass that gave back the most regular features in a state of horrible distortion, and that changed the purest complexion into a jumble of

muddy colours—there was nothing that could have given pleasure to even an optimist.

Blanche was not an optimist, but she was a timid young girl, fearful of giving offence and unwilling to cause trouble, and she tried to speak cheerfully as she said, with pardonable feminine hypocrisy, that ‘it was very nice indeed.’

Meanwhile Miss Barbara had taken up the flaring candle that the Yorkshire handmaid had left burning on the chimney-piece, and was inquisitively inspecting the outside of Blanche’s luggage, which stood, corded and canvased, just where the fly-driver had set down each package.

‘One, two, three. Three trunks. You you must have a great quantity of clothes, my dear. Quite a large wardrobe. Three, four—ah! that is a bonnet-box. May I peep into it? I like to see anything new in the bonnet way,’ said Miss Barbara, undoing

the simple fastenings of the smallest box of the four.

‘There is nothing new there—that is, not very new—’ said Blanche, with a quivering lip. She could not bring herself to tell this gaunt hostess that the little white bonnet had come home from the Colombo milliner’s but one short month before death had first darkened the threshold of her dear old home with the shadow of his presence. Captain Morton it was who had pounced upon that innocent scrap of freshly imported Paris finery, with its snowy tufts of marabou feathers sparkling with the bright mockery of dewdrops, its rich Brussels lace, and its tasteful purity of outline, as a present to his daughter. Nothing could be too good, in the fond father’s estimation, for Blanche. True, in her secluded life, there were few opportunities for the display of such harmless, girlish vanities, but there were to be gay

doings at Colombo, where a newly arrived governor was to patronize a Colonial Exhibition, and to give a grand *déjeuner*, with dancing to follow. The Mortons were invited, and Blanche's father was resolved that his girl should not be behindhand with the rest in milliner's frippery, as in his heart of hearts he believed her to be before them all in bright looks and gentle goodness.

Alas! for human projects. Death stepped in to spoil the holiday. Captain Morton had been laid by the side of his faithful wife, under the areca-palms that shaded the little European burying-ground, and Blanche stands under a stranger's roof-tree, in her plain black frock, and she strives not to wince or look vexed as she sees Miss Barbara try the dainty little bonnet on her own grisly head, and grimace before the cheap mirror that gives back her grinning ugliness with goblin grotesqueness. But though the spotless

feathers, and the cobweb lace, and the crystal dewdrops gratified Miss Barbara's fancy, the little bonnet could not well be forced down upon Miss Barbara's head, which was long and large, with its high narrow forehead and wiry curls.

'I'll help you to unpack,' said the second Miss Orpington; and as she spoke she cast a curious, greedy glance at Blanche's modest trunks.

'Yes, I'll help you to unpack and settle your things a bit. I dare say many of them are of no use here, but, if so—'

But before Miss Barbara could develop her kindly schemes in Blanche's behalf, the voice of her elder sister was heard from the landing-place beyond.

'Barbara, what keeps you so long up there? John's come home. He wants to see Blanche. Tell her to make haste, for he will have to go out again, most likely.'

Blanche's grim patroness whipped off the fairy bonnet from her own iron-grey head, more quickly than she had put it on. All her vanity was not proof against ridicule, and she flinched from encountering the eye of her cynical elder sister, whilst that delicate snowflake of Paris workmanship should be perched on her metallic ringlets.

'Make haste and take off your things, dear. You know your way. I'll leave you the light,' said Miss Barbara, hurriedly, and she whisked herself out of the room, and shut the door with a slam.

How Blanche Morton's heart throbbed as she hastened to lay aside her travelling dress, and as she smoothed back her shining brown hair before the ghastly looking-glass. She had much ado to open one of the trunks, for the too zealous porter of the London hotel had drawn the knots unnecessarily tight, and the hard hemp hurt the soft fingers that

strove with it, but Blanche's mind was full of the coming interview with her real guardian and protector.

Her father's words, often repeated, as his voice grew feeble and his eyes grew dim— 'When I am gone, remember that I have asked a good and just man to be as a father to my darling,' kept ringing in her ears. That sacred place, she felt, could never be supplied in its tender intimacy and unswerving reliance. Never could any friendship replace the sweet memories of home and childhood. But she was fully prepared to like and to esteem John Orpington. And it was with a quick beating heart that she hurried down the steep stairs, lifted the clumsy latch that the parlour door yet retained, and found herself in presence of her guardian.

CHAPTER VIII.

GUARDIAN AND WARD.

JOHN ORPINGTON was standing with his back to the fire, so that his was the first face which met Blanche's gaze as she entered. He was waiting for her entrance, evidently; for he moved from where he stood on the faded hearthrug, and advanced a step or two with outstretched hand, but unsmiling lips.

'I am glad to see you. We shall be good friends, I hope. Your poor father and I were very good friends, years ago,' said the surgeon, bluntly.

Blanche took in hers the short-fingered hand, so red and clammy withal, and she

could not help feeling an innate thrill of repugnance, as if she had unwittingly touched the slimy skin of a reptile. Through her tears—they came very easily to her eyes now at the mention of her father's name—she looked at John Orpington, and she fought against the instinct of her own heart, that cried aloud to her, 'Beware!' She well knew what was the sentiment that rose up within her as her eyes rested on that broad, freckled face, with the heavy jowl, the resolute eyes, the coarse sallowness of complexion. It was the same dreamy terror, the same formless fear, that had haunted her for weeks and months; a terror and a fear that seemed wholly unreasonable, but that clung to her soul and filled it with a sickly dread.

Far away upon the voyage Europewards, this shadowy apprehension had first begun to make itself felt; and as Blanche drew nearer and nearer to Whiteparish, the strange un-

welcome feeling had deepened and gathered strength. It had become more boding, more constant in its shapeless foreshadowing of coming evil, and grief, and pain, since Blanche had entered her guardian's house and seen what manner of women were her guardian's sisters and her own future companions. But in struggling with this besetting thought, this half-formed antipathy, the orphan girl had had one vantage ground, one ray of light towards which her eyes could turn hopefully. Rock-fast she held in her heart the memory of her father's high opinion of John Orpington. Come what may, she had thought, my guardian is a good man.

And now Blanche stood with her weak white fingers in the strong grasp of that moist red hand of the surgeon's, and her pretty brown eyes met the eyes of John Orpington, and sank beneath their steady scrutiny. Poor Blanche!—poor, indeed—she who had

no father, no friend! She who had hoped against hope in this unknown guardian of hers—she knew at once that she was face to face with her Embodied Fear!

Mr. Orpington was not unkind. He had not smiled at the first, for he was a man with whom such manifestations were rare; but at last his firm mouth relaxed into a smile, and his voice was studiously softened, when he said:

‘You are tired, and everything seems strange to you, naturally enough. But you will settle down and feel at home with us in a day or two. You must remember that this is your home, and that Bridget, and Barbara, and I are your friends. You must try and learn to like us. I dare say the liking will be mutual. I am a plain man, and our house is but humble, and our life dull; but poor James Morton’s daughter is heartily welcome to the best we have.’

Then he released the little white hand, and set a chair for Blanche beside the fire, and asked her one or two commonplace questions regarding the journey from London, the voyage from Ceylon, and so forth, looking at the fire the while, and apparently paying no very great attention to the answers which he received. And presently he began to speak to his sisters respecting household matters and parish business, and turned the conversation, as if accidentally, from Blanche and her antecedents; though by some intuition she knew that Mr. Orpington had divined her agitation, and wished to give her time to recover from it. It was surely a kind thought and a kind act, and Blanche could not but acknowledge to herself that, throughout the evening, her host's conduct was more considerate than that of either of his sisters. When tea-time came, and with it the substantial refreshments of which Miss Orpington

had spoken, Blanche tried to eat, lest her refusal should be taken in ill part by the grim mistresses of the house, but she could not. She was saved from Miss Bridget's curt reproof, and Miss Barbara's sneering commentary on her inability to relish such plain fare, by the doctor's quietly remarking that she was feverish after the unaccustomed travel, but would be well after a night's rest. - And later on still, when Miss Orpington was inclined to deny Blanche's timid request for a fire in her bedroom, a luxury at mention of which both of those thrifty spinsters were scandalized, their brother rang the bell and ordered that a fire should be lighted in Miss Morton's room.

In short, during all that dismal first evening at Whiteparish, John Orpington unobtrusively screened the newly-arrived guest from sundry petty annoyances which she would otherwise have had to endure. Com-

pared with his rugged sisters, he was a paragon of hospitality. And yet Blanche was unable to hide from herself the truth that she feared him more, and recoiled from him with a more innate repulsion, than from stony Bridget, or even from Barbara of the false smile and unctuous ringlets.

That was a weary interval of time that passed before Blanche was able to escape to her own room and be at peace again. As she sat during the hours of the listless evening, while Miss Bridget found congenial employment in her account books, and while Miss Barbara read aloud the county newspaper for her brother's benefit, Blanche had time to think. Her pulses were indeed beating quickly, as the surgeon had said, and there was a dull sound in her ears, like the peal of muffled bells, but these feverish symptoms were not due to mere bodily fatigue.

Blanche's mind was eagerly, timorously

active in striving to puzzle out the problem of her singular aversion—her wicked unreasonable aversion, as she thought it—for her father's friend and her own guardian. It was not because of his ugliness, surely. Even in the course of her own narrow experience, she had seen homely countenances—as ugly, perhaps, as John Orpington's—and had felt no thrill of repugnance towards their owners. Nay, some of these harsh-featured visages had been irradiated by a light from within that had inspired a liking and a confidence which mere soulless beauty would have failed to attract. Mrs. Mulcaster was ugly. The Scotch doctor of the 'Ganges' was very ugly. But Blanche had been drawn towards both of these good, kindly persons from the first.

But John Orpington! It was not his broad flat face, it was not his heavy under-jaw, it was not even the unwholesome hue of his

complexion that inspired a prejudice against him. Neither was it that his hands were red, or that his lank hair looked dragged and damp. But the eyes, the terrible eyes—eyes not remarkable for form or colour; in them it was that Blanche Morton read the expression of what is, perhaps, the most dangerous agent of evil upon earth—a pitiless will. A cruel will, rampant, merciless, unscrupulous, strong with the lithe strength of the serpent that can twine his loose folds, as if in sport, around the trembling antelope, and presently crush the bones and devour the carcass. Poets have described eyes as the windows of the soul. What sort of a soul was that, thought shuddering Blanche, that glared out upon her from under John Orpington's black brows!

Eyes are tell-tales, sometimes. They occasionally give the lie to the smooth words that drop so glibly from the lips. We may

meet a stranger in the streets, and that stranger's eyes may challenge ours, as it were, and read us at a glance. Then we go our ways, and all we know is, that for some few seconds of our mortal time, we were in presence of a stronger nature—not necessarily a purer, or a higher, or a wiser, but still a stronger nature—than our own. But the eyes do not always, or in all places, unmask the spirit within. It is at intervals, by accident or by design, that the revelation is made. And it is not improbable that the real cause of the repugnance which Mr. Orpington had awakened in the minds of many of his patients—a repugnance lulled to sleep long ago—was due to some sudden flashing forth of the formidable will that lurked behind that broad, low forehead of the surgeon's.

Whether the glimpse of John Orpington's strong will, with which Blanche Morton

had been favoured, was due to design or to accident, it would have been hard to say. There are men who know their power as the snake knows that his cold gaze will bring down the frightened bird, with fluttering wings and piteous chirp, into his hungry jaws. There are men whose haughty will goes out to conquer, and bind, and bear away captive, so to speak, just as the falcon ruffles its plumage and fixes its fierce eye upon the doomed quarry. But whether intentionally or not, Blanche felt that for one instant her guardian's inner self had been revealed to her.

She sat still, almost cowering in the chair which the master of the house had placed near the fire for her, and the sick chill of loneliness, the need of advice, and help, and affection, weighed on her young heart like the pressure of an ice-cold hand. She felt afraid to believe in the truth of what her

warning instinct cried aloud to her. Was it possible that her father had been deceived in his estimate of his old friend's character? Was his trust reposed where no trust should have been given—and were these uncouth people really as stern, and griping, and merciless as they were plain of feature and unconciliatory in manners? If so, what a life would be hers, ground between two such millstones as Miss Bridget and Miss Barbara, under the resistless pressure of a will such as their brother possessed!

In a sort of desperation, as a belated traveller, when a flash of lightning has suddenly lit up with lurid brightness the chasms and abysses, and splintered precipices among which lies his darkling way, has sometimes closed his eyes and pressed on, so did Blanche avert her thoughts from the misery of her position, should her fears be founded on fact.

She found a feminine satisfaction in impugning her own judgment. It was much easier and much more pleasant to take a sanguine view of affairs, and to pronounce her own hastily formed opinion to be both erroneous and uncharitable. A young girl, and a good girl, tenderly bred up in the sweet loving home atmosphere, is not often very rash or very severe in criticizing her elders. Blanche upbraided herself for her unworthy suspicions of the man whom, out of all his acquaintance, her father had singled out as the fittest guardian for his daughter. To her it was a relief to remember that John's name stood high in the world's esteem. Even Captain Wyvil, who owned that he had seen John without much liking him, had styled him an honest man. It was a pleasure to know that she was quite wrong in her silly fears, and that Mr. Orpington was an admirable man, unpolished, but of sterling worth, and

that his sisters——no doubt his sisters were very good women, when rightly understood.

‘ You travelled by the same train as Captain Hugh Wyvil, then? I know he was expected. He is nephew to old Sir Phœbus, who is one of my patients——my principal patient. You found the young gentleman agreeable, I dare say,’ said Plain John Orpington, biting his nails the while.

‘ Oh yes, he was very kind. Mrs. Davenport knew him in India,’ replied Blanche.

‘ Ladies, and gentlemen too, out in India are dreadful flirts, ain’t they?’ tittered Miss Barbara, from behind the county newspaper.

‘ Our young friend cannot well know much of India, Barbara. Ceylon is a very different place,’ said the surgeon, stirring the fire in the slow, thoughtful fashion that appeared congenial to his nature.

‘ Captain Wyvil at Deepdene again! He has been a stranger there of late,——quite a

stranger. His uncle will be glad to see him. I am afraid that his apparent neglect has in some degree alienated the affection which Sir Phœbus felt for him. He was the favourite nephew—but a little wild, perhaps—a little wild.’

And Mr. Orpington shook his head in mild deprecation of the derelictions of his patient’s kinsman. His tone was serious, but not in the least harsh, nor had it any ring of that artificial sanctimoniousness that worldlings call cant, and which awakens disgust in even the simplest of educated listeners. Plain John spoke exactly as he was used to speak, with a sort of deliberate bluffness, and an accent that carried conviction because it seemed fraught with conviction. There was this difference between the Whiteparish doctor and other men of plain speech, that whereas the latter blurted out whatever came uppermost, the former always took time

to think, and his words seemed the weightier for the calm voice and cool manner in which they were delivered.

It did not occur to Blanche to doubt the accuracy of her guardian's information respecting Hugh's wildness and his uncle's just displeasure, though she was surprised to feel a little pained and disappointed at the intelligence. The guardsman's handsome face, with its frank eyes and bright, honest smile, rose up before her mental vision. He could not be very bad, she thought; and on this theme Blanche fell to musing.

'That child ought to be in bed. She's half asleep as it is. Young folks are knocked up easily, now-a-days,' said Bridget Orpington, who had laid aside her account books, and was now scanning Blanche's pale face with a sort of scornful curiosity.

'You had better take my sister's advice,' said the surgeon, with one of his unfre-

quent smiles. 'After a night's rest you will feel more at home. Shall I light your candle?'

And the doctor lighted Blanche's candle, and wished her good-night in a grave fatherly way. There was nothing in his eyes now to alarm anyone. The blinds were down, as it were, and no ruthless spirit peered forth from the windows of Plain John's soul.

Up rose Miss Barbara, and wreathed her long arm round Blanche's slender waist.

'I'll come with you, my dear, this first night,' said Blanche's patroness; 'just to see that you are comfortable.'

And with a good-night to Bridget and her brother, Blanche went, thus escorted, to her room. At last she was left alone. At last she would lay her head upon her pillow, for the first time in that strange house. And then the many events of the long day passed in weary procession through her mind. But

her last thought, as her eyes closed in sleep was one of regret, almost of penitence, for the unjust judgment, which she felt assured that she had passed on that good man, her guardian.

CHAPTER IX.

NIGHT !

THAT death-in-life which we call sleep—that familiar phenomenon in which, thanks to habit, we see little that is wonderful—is governed by laws respecting which the wisest are ignorant. All our knowledge with regard to the form of existence in which we spend so large a portion of our time, is imperfect and empirical. There are many, for instance, who cannot sleep in a strange room, but who toss restlessly to and fro, and pass wakeful hours, until use has dulled the irritating sense of novelty. Blanche Morton was too tired, physically speaking, for a vigil of this kind,

on the first night of her sojourn beneath her guardian's roof. But if the bodily fatigues that she had undergone weighed down her eyelids and lulled her to slumber, her fancy was awake and full of a feverish activity.

Dreams, short, broken, fleeting — such dreams as the memory vainly strives to grasp and retain—passed in phantasmal procession through her passive mind. And the purport of all these dreams was identical. The actors were changed, the scenes were shifted, on that shadowy stage of broken light and chequered darkness; but the same elements of evil, and peril, and trouble were rapidly and bodingly reproduced. Again, again, was the fantastic drama of sorrow and suffering played out, and still there was nothing on which the half-torpid reason could seize—nothing with which remembrance could grapple; it was all a swift succession of fleeting images that defied scrutiny.

At such seasons as this, though the sleeper may appear to rest profoundly, the senses are morbidly active, and a touch, a sound will call every faculty into instant wakefulness. Blanche Morton awoke. Her awaking was not the gradual process by which we habitually open our drowsy eyes to the fact that a new day has brought new cares, new opportunities, and that we have been launched once more, as it were, upon the great world of thought and action. This was one of those cases in which the soul appears to call aloud upon her earthly companion to rise, and at once, since danger is at hand. Instantly, at that summons, Blanche was awake, with every faculty braced and ready for exertion.

It was very late. Blanche knew that she must have been asleep for some hours, since the slow-burning fire in the grate, a fire which Yorkshire Margaret had flattened down and banked high with damp ashes, so

as to make the most of the coals, had smouldered away to blackness. It was late, and cold as well as late, for the night-wind had risen, and was moaning plaintively around the house, and rustling the leafless poplars that grew beside the pond. But it was not the sobbing of the night-wind, as it boomed in the chimneys, and swirled around the gables, and rattled the windows as if a spectral hand were trying to open them from without, that had disturbed Blanche Morton's repose. No; it was a cry—a long, low, often-repeated cry—an outburst of anguish and distress, monotonous as the mournings of the ceaseless gale itself, but wholly distinct from it—the cry of a living thing in pain.

Hastily Blanche rose, and throwing a wrapper over her shoulders, opened the door of her room. She listened. There was no repetition of the sound that had scared slumber from her eyes. All was hushed, except

the sob of the wind and the rattling of the windows. It was cold, and quite dark. Blanche drew her breath more freely.

‘It was fancy—a dream,’ she said, and was about to close the door. The cry was renewed—a long, sad wail of pain and entreaty. It was more distinct than before, and the quarter from which it proceeded seemed to be that where lay the second of the two long passages that diverged from the landing-place. Blanche had not entered this passage, which Miss Barbara had briefly described as communicating with some old lumber rooms and store rooms. And the Orpingtons, she had been told, slept in the same part of the house as that in which her own chamber was situated. But there was no doubt, now, that the low, sorrowful cry came from the direction of this disused corridor, where, to the best of Blanche’s knowledge, no one slept. It was a moan of

distress, however, and it was not in Blanche Morton's nature to be deaf to that piteous appeal. She never hesitated or lingered, but, groping her way back into her chamber, she lighted her candle, wrapped a shawl around her, and left her room, guided by that wailing cry, which was now continuous.

There was probably some broken casement through which the night-wind gained access to the house, for Blanche was forced to screen the light with her open hand, to prevent its being extinguished by the cold indraught of rushing air that swept past her as the gusts raved among the chimney-stacks of the old farm-house. Signs of neglect, indeed, were everywhere perceptible. Some of the panels were as rotten as touchwood, crumbling away piecemeal, and leaving ghastly patches of bare lath and plaster. Giant cobwebs, black with the dust of years, hung from the network of interlaced beams over-

head, and the whole dwelling seemed to exhale the peculiar sickly scent that tells of dry-rot and decay. If Blanche's new home had not been beautiful in her eyes before, assuredly it was not beautiful then, as she passed with cautious tread along the rickety planking of the narrow passage and across the shallow landing-place, while her candle, with all her precautions, flared and guttered in the bitter wind.

As she reached the corner of the unexplored passage, the cries ceased. There was a dead silence. Blanche stood still, listening, and glancing fearfully around her. For the first time it had occurred to her how strange it was that her hosts should not have been disturbed by the ill-omened sounds that had broken her own rest. Was their sleep sounder than hers, or could it be that in her fatigue and over-excitement she had mistaken the moaning of the wind or the scream

of some sea-bird driven inland by the tempest, for the entreaty of a human being in pain?

As these thoughts were passing through her mind, the cry was repeated, and this time it unmistakably came from the extremity of the passage, narrow, dark, and uninviting, at the entrance of which Blanche stood—a wild, crooning outcry, such as the Banshee of Irish tradition has been thought to utter when death and misfortune were at hand. There was something in that weird shriek, low and yet shrill, that curdled the listener's blood. Blanche cast a glance of alarm down the dark passage, and for the first time she wavered in her purpose. But instantly the inarticulate sound changed into the noise of weeping—quick, passionate weeping, mingled with broken utterances like those of some one who speaks in a foreign tongue imperfectly acquired.

Blanche lingered no longer, but, with a quick, light step, advanced along the passage. There were several doors, but most of these were secured by heavy iron padlocks, and there was little cause to doubt that these were the lumber-closets and store-rooms of which Miss Barbara had spoken. At the end of the passage was a room, the door of which was new and strong, an oaken door clamped with iron, evidently of a more recent date than those communicating with the other chambers. There were strong staples, and there was a padlock in which the key had been left.

Still the sounds of weeping continued, and it was evident that they proceeded from within the room to which the oaken door belonged. As abruptly as it had begun, the sound ceased, and then Blanche heard the stealthy approach of some one towards the door, and next the door itself was shaken,

slightly at first, then violently, and the moans broke forth once more. Twice Blanche tried to speak, but twice her voice failed her. Pity and agitation prompted her to call aloud, to ask the nature of the distress that caused this strange inmate of the house to utter complaints that none but herself seemed to hear or heed. But the words died away on her lips.

It was plain that Blanche's approach, almost noiseless as it was, had been detected by the mysterious tenant of this secluded room, for the moans swelled into a whining cry, thoroughly animal, accompanied by a scratching sound upon the panels of the door and an impatient shaking of the lock. Manifestly, whoever or whatever was behind the oaken door, was eager to obtain egress, but could not do so without help. Blanche Morton, by an unreasoning impulse of compassion, laid her hand upon the key, and was

about to turn it in the lock, when the creature on the farther side of the door, probably irritated at the delay, changed its whimpering for a vicious snarl, such as a starving tigress might have uttered, a long-drawn, savage growl, accompanied by a sharp gnashing of teeth, and followed by a horrible medley of mingled groans and laughter. Then the door was furiously assailed from within, and at almost the same instant, while Blanche recoiled from the key as if it had suddenly been changed to red-hot iron, a louder gust of wind tore down the passage, and the candle was instantly extinguished.

To turn and fly from the spot was an impulse too strong to be resisted. Blanche did not scream or swoon; but her terror almost deprived her of the strength necessary to bear her away from the proximity of that dread inmate of her guardian's house. Her limbs trembled as she groped her way

through the darkness, feeling with outstretched hands for the wall, and guiding herself as best she might by the sense of touch. She had no means of relighting the now useless candle which she carried. And to call aloud was an alternative which did not suggest itself to her, even in that agony of blind terror. It was impossible for her to separate, in her bewildered mind, her apprehension of the living malignity that she had provoked from her more vague and ill-defined apprehensions of the strange, hard beings into whose power she had been delivered. All that she had seen of the Orpingtons matched but too well with this new source of horror.

The storm was now at its height. The groaning and creaking of the great poplar trees—the only trees that stood near the house—sounded like the lamentation of some mourning wood-spirit of German legend.

A distant door, burst open by the wind, beat sullenly against the door-jamb from time to time, and every beam and joist and rafter in the old house quivered as if in the grasp of an angry giant. The gale shrieked and howled without, and it was hard to distinguish its wailing voice from the menacing cries that pursued Blanche, as she retreated with quick but faltering steps along the narrow corridor, where the loose boards creaked beneath her tread, and the carpetless floor gave back a hollow sound at every footfall.

Was it in very truth by that threatening clamour, and by that alone, that her steps were dogged; thus Blanche's fears whispered to her as she made her way, groping along the wall, hand over hand, and summoning up recollections of the localities, as best she might, to guide her dubious course.

Or had she, in her excitement, actually

undone the fastenings of the strong door, and thus unwittingly given liberty to the tenant of the room beyond? Surely she was followed. It seemed to her that she heard a stealthier and a heavier tread than her own, pursuing her track. Twice, three times, did she stop and hearken, with an agonized keenness of sense, for the footfall that she dreaded to hear. And it appeared to her, in the wild agitation of the moment, that the thing—she could not define its real nature—following at her heels, stopped too, as if to mock her precautions, and then resumed its march when she again advanced. More than once she shrank down, cowering, as she fancied that she felt the hot breath of the enemy upon her neck. More than once she glanced timorously back over her shoulder, fearing to see a grim face close to her own. And once, when her hand encountered the iron hasp and staples that secured the door of one of the rooms, she

thought the cold touch was that of a hostile hand closing upon her wrist.

She was upon the landing-place now, and she stopped again to listen. Dead silence prevailed. There was no sound but the roar of the storm, that rushed by on its mighty wings. Scream and sob, and raging outburst of brute wrath, these were hushed as if they had never been. Could it be a dream? Ah, no, Blanche knew well enough that this was no dream. But she was not followed. The pale grey light of a wintry morning was beginning to steal in at the eastern windows, and though shadows and dark places were plentiful, in no nook could Blanche's eye detect the lurking form that imagination had pictured up. She crept back to her room, and, for the first time in her life perhaps, made fast the door with bolt and key. But, tired as she was, she could not sleep. She lay awake, fevered, restless, a

prey to tormenting fancies, starting at every sound, and repeatedly lifting her weary head from the pillow as she thought she heard a strong hand try the fastenings of the door. It was not until the world's awaking, not until the cocks were crowing in distant farmyards, and the barking of dogs and the tinkle of sheep-bells came from the pastures, and carts went lumbering by on heavy wheels, that ground and churned the loose flints of the newly-mended road, that exhaustion gained the mastery, and that for a little time—before Yorkshire Margaret's hard knuckles rapped roughly against the panels of her door—Blanche slept a heavy, dreamless sleep.

CHAPTER X.

K.C.B.

‘WOOD!’ said Sir Phœbus, sitting bolt upright in his arm-chair, and speaking tartly, as usual—‘Wood!’

The master of Deepdene had been dozing, and had suffered the fire to get low. He dozed very often now, did Sir Phœbus Wyvil, Baronet, K.H. and K.C.B., once an ornament of British diplomacy, and sometime M.P. for Little Swillington. He was old, and meagre, and wizened, a little undersized man, with a face as white and almost as thin as a hatchet, with a curly wig, with shrunken limbs that needed the support of a crutch-

headed cane. His was a dry old age, not a green one. Bloodless, shrivelled, and spare, he resembled nothing so much as a little old dead tree in which the sap has long ceased to stir, and on which a leaf is never seen.

‘Wood! How negligent you are, Tupper! I might freeze, and you would not care, I believe!’ snapped the baronet, as obedient Tupper, summoned by the tinkle of his master’s study bell, brought fresh logs for the fire. But very soon the old gentleman’s senile anger took a new shape.

‘Not so many, not so many! Don’t pile it up in that wasteful way. I don’t choose to be eaten out of house and home by a pack of rascally, extravagant servants. Confound you, sir; ugh! ugh! take half of them off again!’ quavered the baronet, in his piping voice, coughing a hard cough the while.

Tupper was a well-trained attendant. He was, in fact, valet, butler, footman, groom of

the chambers, and majordomo at Deepdene, and had held these cumulative functions for years. He was a modern English edition of Caleb Balderstone, only that he served for wages, not for love. But he was a good servant, and valuable as a safety-valve for his employer's peevish outbursts of temper. He knew perfectly well that Sir Phœbus could not do without him, but he never presumed upon the knowledge. Hard words glanced off from Tupper as arrows from the shell of a tortoise, and did him no harm. Indeed, the valet, who was a tall, strongly built man, with a flat face and crisp, dark hair, had a sort of regard for his master, in which feeling the element of compassion had no small share. So, when Sir Phœbus scolded him, he looked down at the peevish little face, and the wasted limbs, and the padded coat that enclosed the baronet's frail torso, and the remembrance of his own breadth of

chest and stalwart muscles took the edge, as it were, off the old gentleman's spiteful speech.

Tupper bowed, and removed the logs, silently and dexterously, and then lingered, on some plausible pretext of adjusting the curtains or of sweeping back the white wood ashes, till his master should be pleased to speak again. He knew well enough what was uppermost in the mind of Sir Phœbus, but a body servant who understands his duties resembles a well-conducted ghost in this wise, that he will not speak until he is spoken to. For a couple of minutes, perhaps, Sir Phœbus continued to warm his thin white fingers, spreading out his shaking palms and diamond rings to the reviving blaze, and then rubbing his hands softly on his lean knees, but preserving an absolute silence.

‘Tupper, are you there?’ he said at last.

‘Yes, Sir Phœbus,’ returned the valet, drawing near.

‘Where’s Mr. Hugh?’ asked the baronet.

Mr. Hugh was the name by which it still pleased Sir Phœbus to call the nephew he had adopted as heir of what he had to leave, which was no trifle. It did not include Deepdene and the landed property, to be sure, which must all go, under strict entail, to objectionable George, the baronet’s brother and heir presumptive. But everybody knew that Sir Phœbus had great savings amassed during years of retrenchment, and everybody felt assured that these accumulations were as certain to go to Captain Wyvil as the title and estate to pass to George, second son of the late baronet, and next in succession to Sir Phœbus.

Yet the question as to the captain’s whereabouts was snappishly asked, and the valet’s

answer was hesitating and almost deprecatory in its tone.

‘I think, Sir Phœbus, the captain is on the terrace, walking up and down. I saw him from the hall-window just as the bell rang.’

‘Humph!’ said Sir Phœbus: ‘smoking?’

And he lifted his gold-rimmed eyeglass, which hung by a broad watered-silk ribbon round his neck, and scrutinized the face of the valet.

‘No lies, sir; smoking?’

‘Why, yes, Sir Phœbus,’ returned Tupper, very humbly, ‘smoking a cigar. Most young gentlemen—’

But he was cut short with—

‘Hold your tongue, Tupper! Don’t pretend to tell *me* what most young gentlemen do—ugh! ugh!—there are no gentlemen now-a-days worthy to be named—a set of cigar-smoking, unmannerly—ugh! ugh! ugh!’

And here the old man's cough overpowered his weak wrath, while Tupper respectfully poured out barley-water, and placed the box of lozenges within reach of his master's tremulous fingers.

The paroxysm shook the baronet's frail person as a powerful engine, throbbing with the fierce pulsation of steam, shakes some crazy old dwelling-house that does duty for a factory. When the coughing came to an end, the old gentleman sat blinking with his watery eyes at the fire, as miserable a shadow of humanity as need be.

Yet Sir Phœbus Wyvil had been a man of note in his day—a courtier, a diplomatist, a dandy of no slight pretensions. His Parliamentary career was a failure, certainly; for the talents that won him fame in the gilded salons of Continental capitals, were unfit for the rougher arena of the House of Commons. But abroad he really gleaned a

few laurels, such bays as his chiefs—Castle-reagh and others—could spare from their own redundant chaplets. His French was very pure. He had, at one time, a happy knack of making harmless little epigrams, which bore the same relation to those of dreadful Prince Talleyrand that summer lightning bears to the red-forked flash that wraps a steeple in flames. He did not shine much as a writer of despatches—such heavy artillery might be considered too ponderous for his handling—but his diplomatic notes were beyond all praise; and in that unofficial Foreign Office intercourse that tells for so much, he often succeeded where a manlier Englishman would have broken down.

‘Phœbus Wyvil,’ so a very great warrior and statesman was reported to have said, ‘is the best man we have for the Backstairs. He fetches and carries well.’ And the praise was only just. Mr. Wyvil, in the intrigue-

laden atmosphere of courts, such courts as Europe could show in the first three decades of our century, was emphatically the right man in the right place. Where some men's lungs would have collapsed, choked by the stifling air that was heavy with secrets and plots, amatory and political, his weak little chest expanded like a mountaineer's in the keen breath of the Alps. He was a 'ladies' man,' one of those universal adorers who amuse without doing mischief, and as such, he was welcome behind the silken curtains of many a boudoir, where a sterner negotiator would have fluttered the doves unduly. In persuading the occult influences that acted upon monarchs and ministers in setting in motion the hidden mechanisms of statecraft, and in winning over powerful but unrecognized allies, Mr. Wyvil had no rival.

The labourer in those courtly vineyards had his reward. While his father was yet

alive he became Sir Phœbus, and received, first, the Hanoverian Order, then the Bath; but he never ceased to rail, all his life long at the scandalous ingratitude of his neglectful country. His grievances were threefold. He had wished for a peerage. He had yearned for a Grand Cross of the knightly order in which he held a humbler grade. He had desired a Legation—to be a full-blown Ambassador at last—an Excellency; with a staff of his own and a despatch-box, with his name in golden letters on the crimson leather.

But his wriggings and pleadings, his fawning and smirking, and appeals to the good offices of the Lady Maries and Royal Highnesses who could help him up the ladder of preferment, proved futile. The minister was obdurate. Wyvil was a K.C.B., it was said, and might rest and be thankful. Of course he could have a pension. He should be

Secretary of Legation at some pleasant place, if he were not yet tired of airing his French, and of paying compliments to the left-handed wives of kings. But as for an Embassy, that was out of the question. Humming-birds and butterflies were very charming in their way, no doubt, but not fit to harness to even the chariot of Venus, still less to a car of state. Wyvil might be Consul-General in some earthquake-abounding district of South America, and was welcome to draw his two thousand a-year and face the fevers, but not to have an Embassy. He was really not strong enough for the place. Just at this juncture the old baronet, Sir Arthur, died, and Sir Phœbus, with a long purse, easily stormed the doors of Parliament. He entered St. Stephen's with rage in his heart, and with some hope as well. He would teach the Government that so valuable a public servant could be dangerous

as an enemy, as well as useful as a friend. He would bully the Cabinet into doing him what he called justice. So he went into the House to fight, as many another man has done, like Hal of the Wynd, for his own hand, and waged war against the Treasury Benches. Alas! again was Sir Phœbus found not to be strong enough for the place. The game he had undertaken to play needs mightier mental thews than his. To pile Pelion upon Ossa, to heave and fling rocky missiles until the alarmed Olympians compromise with the truculent Titan, this is a task for tougher sinews than those of Sir Phœbus Wyvil. When he thought to hurl rocks at His Majesty's ministers, he only succeeded in pelting them with sugar-plums, like a child flinging *confetti* in a carnival crowd. When he would fain have drenched his foes with vitriol, he did but sprinkle them with rose-water. The heads of the Govern-

ment did not even deign to parry his assaults. With contemptuous affability, they deputed some underling of the Treasury to cross his official weapon with that gilded little court sword which Sir Phœbus kept flourishing, and the baronet was at once disarmed, put down, laughed at, and on his persisting in his tale of wrong, fairly laughed out of Parliament and out of London, where he never showed his face again.

Sir Phœbus Wyvil retired to his ancestral halls, shut the front door of Deepdene in the faces of his neighbours, the jovial Lincolnshire squires, between whom and himself there had never been much reciprocal regard, and played the solitary for many a long year. His health had never been good, and the late hours and revelry of his early career had not been calculated to brace his constitution. At Deepdene he had pure air, certainly, nor was there any temptation to excess in diet or

wakefulness. But he took black care with him in the four-horse travelling carriage, that had a German courier in the rumble, puffing his meerschaum in the face of the disgusted French valet. He fretted, and pined, and brooded over his grievances, until his bodily ailments gathered head, and he became for life a valetudinarian.

But the master of Deepdene saved a great deal of money. The good old gentlemanly vice of avarice furnished him with almost the only interest that he still felt in the world's affairs. He cut down his establishment to the lowest pitch attainable by any man of station, whose desire to save struggles with a lingering wish to keep up appearances. His character was not strong enough to carry him to such lengths of parsimony as the true miser, sublime in his sordid self-torment, can devise for the mortification of the flesh. But the voice of fame set down Sir Phœbus as a

screw, and spoke the truth. A screw he was, a hard master, a close-fisted landlord, a neighbour to whose forbearance or generosity there was no appeal. He was very far from making the most of his property, because an estate cannot be well administered from an elbow-chair, and Sir Phœbus never stirred beyond his park gates. But he would not spend a penny on improvements or repairs. Every tenant knew that if he wanted to drain the ten-acre, or to mend the barn, or to enlarge the outbuildings, it was idle to expect Sir Phœbus to bear any share in the costs; and by sheer force of not spending the baronet grew wealthy.

His nephew, Hugh, was generally regarded as his heir. Sir Phœbus had shown some affection for Hugh, or more correctly speaking, had done a good deal for the lad, sending him to Eton, and to Sandhurst, buying him a cavalry commission, and finally arranging

for his exchange into the Guards. Hugh was the son of the baronet's favourite brother, Harry Wyvil. Harry was dead years and years ago, but Sir Phœbus had always cherished an affectionate recollection of him. Harry, the third son of old Sir Arthur, a mild boy with a good deal of reverence in his nature, had looked up to Phœbus as the cleverest and most distinguished of youths. Whereas odious George, rude of speech and stout of arm, had been used to ridicule his elegant elder brother, called him a muff, or by whatever opprobrious synonym for the modern muff was used by Rugbeians of the pre-Waterloo period, and usually ended by pommelling his senior in unmerciful fashion. It is no wonder that Sir Phœbus loved Harry, and not much more surprising that he hated George. Objectionable George must have the title and the lands, but Harry's son, Hugh, might surely reckon on succeeding to the old

gentleman's very considerable personalty. Of the baronetcy, Hugh had little chance. Rude George had children, but it was pretty certain that Sir Phœbus would not let his surviving brother, with whom he had not exchanged any communication for a score of years, benefit by his long habit of hoarding. Yet Sir Phœbus was hard to please. Although he had in a manner taught Hugh to consider himself as heir to his great savings, the uncle and nephew seldom met without some unfortunate bickerings. This was no fault of Captain Wyvil's. He was, in truth, a good-natured, generous specimen of his class, and sincerely grateful for the substantial kindnesses received from his elderly kinsman. He pitied his uncle also with a very genuine pity, and put up with hard words and black looks in a forbearing manner that would have astonished his companions in the regiment. But sometimes Sir Phœbus would

not be pacified, and it may be that his nephew's patience was occasionally exhausted. At all events, Captain Wyvil had more than once been exiled from Deepdene, renounced and disinherited. And in a few weeks or months the Desdichado had been summoned back, taken again into favour, and his name replaced as residuary legatee in his uncle's will.

‘Tell Captain Wyvil,’ the baronet began, and then broke off.

‘Shall I beg the captain to come to you, Sir Phœbus?’ said Tupper, after a pause long enough to give his master time to conclude the sentence, if he were so minded.

‘Yes—no—wait, booby! Don't you see I am not dressed? My coat!’—said Sir Phœbus, with his usual amenity. And, indeed, the ex-diplomate was still in the gorgeous silken dressing-gown of many hues, wadded and lined with Astracan wool, in which he

passed his mornings and evenings. With Tupper's help he now slowly endued the stays, the padded coat, the stiff stock, the varnished boots a world too tight—in a word, the costume of his youth. His light-brown wig, with its innocent little curls, was brought into its proper place above the wrinkled narrow brow. The weak white hands sparkled with diamond rings. The perfumed handkerchief protruded from the breast-pocket of the blue coat, as when George was king.

‘And now,’ said Sir Phœbus, ‘tell Mr. Hugh I request the pleasure of his company.’

But the tone in which these formal words were spoken was exceptionally sour, and Tupper shrugged his shoulders as he went to do his master's bidding.

‘There'll be a blow-up again, as sure as my name's Tom Tupper,’ said he. ‘I've half a mind to give the captain a hint, but it's against rules—against rules.’

CHAPTER XI.

UNCLE AND NEPHEW.

‘In the study, as usual, eh? Tupper. Very well. I’ll come in directly;’ had been Captain Wyvil’s careless reply to the message which the valet brought him. And he tossed away his cigar, and walked with leisurely step along the broad terrace, where the peacocks were displaying their jewelled trains in the welcome gleam of short-lived wintry sun that had broken forth for a while from the dark wrack of slow-sailing clouds. The study, indeed, was the only apartment in that great mansion, except the bed-room and dressing-room, which it

adjoined, of which the master of Deepdene made any use. Sir Phœbus lived entirely in the western wing of that stately dwelling-house, which had been considered worthy of special notice in the 'Beauties of England and Wales.' There was a picture gallery at Deepdene, seventy-four feet long; and on the walls of which hung some paintings whose precious canvas the dealers of Paris or London would willingly have covered with gold pieces once, twice, even thrice, had they been for sale. There were noble drawing-rooms, full of pretty and expensive toys, rare china, dainty enamel, marbles, and quaint gewgaws of the Renaissance period; but they were shut up against all but the old housekeeper and her subordinates. Sir Phœbus lived in his study. He dined there, alone, on such tit-bits as suited his valetudinarian's appetite; and every day Captain Hugh had to sit down to his solitary meal

in the great dining-room, where the portraits of dead and gone squires looked down upon their descendant as he ate his cutlets and sipped his sherry, under Tupper's inspection. Sir Phœbus always sat in the study, on what the valet called his 'good' days. On the bad days, when asthma and rheumatism, and a pack of congenial complaints, fastened the more virulently on the baronet, and threatened to drag him down, Sir Phœbus remained in his bed-chamber, and was invisible to other eyes than those of his valet and his doctor.

The study was evidently not the apartment of a book-worm. It contained no books, except some half-dozen volumes of memoirs in the French language; and these, gilt-edged and purple bound, stood up in their carved book-case, stiff and prim, as so many French demoiselles fresh from the *pension*, and bore no signs of use. But

there were plenty of pictures, delicate miniatures in morocco or velvet cases, half open, and displaying the painted prettinesses whose charms a courtly limner had perpetuated on ivory pastels, in carved frames of a dead gold hue, views of this or that palace or royal villa. There were letters, too, some framed and glazed, as too sacred to be handled by the profane; others half visible as they protruded from inlaid desks and portfolios incrustated with malachite and pearls,—letters whose caligraphy was indifferent, and whose grammar was not always immaculate, but which had been traced by the august pens of very great ladies indeed. These letters were the pride of their owner's life. They were his amulets against the cold shade of ministerial neglect. If the Premier had been ungrateful to so good a public servant, at least here was balm for hurt vanity. It was pleasant

still to gaze on the faded ink, and to peruse the words in which some royal Amalia or Louisa, some Wilhelm Rex or imperial Alexander, had thanked *ce cher Monsieur Wyvil* for services performed.

There were many objects of price in this study, so-called, which was as a temple to the egotism of the ex-diplomatist; and to each of these a history appertained. Rich caskets of gold and lapis lazuli, damascened arms from the East, portraits set with diamonds, gold snuff-boxes with a miniature of some florid Teutonic royalty on the lid; these were the presents which Sir Phœbus had picked up in the course of his career, the trophies of the high consideration in which he had been held. Snuff-boxes and decorations, trinkets and stars and crosses, had been very freely distributed in Europe during the first dozen years that followed the abdication at Fontainebleau; and even

so small a diplomatic minnow as Sir Phœbus had received his share of the crumbs that fell from the royal banqueting boards. There, among his *spolia opima*, sat the baronet, propped up with cushions in his deep arm-chair, and his look was sour and his lips compressed as he returned his nephew's greeting.

‘My health is as usual, I thank you. Oblige me by sitting down. To see you standing by the mantelpiece in that lounging manner irritates my nerves. Pray be careful, sir; you all but touched that malachite column with your elbow. I would not have that little statuette broken for fifty thousand pounds. The Queen of—ugh, ugh, ugh——’

And here the hard cough interrupted the baronet in his speech. Captain Hugh Wyvil smiled good-humouredly as he moved away from the chimneypiece against which

he had leaned, and took the seat to which his uncle's quivering finger had motioned him. A fine soldier-like nephew he looked, and one of whom most uncles might well have been proud, with his tall figure, his tawny moustache and frank blue eyes, and the bronzed manly face that contrasted not unpleasantly with his fair hair. And nevertheless it was a fact that Sir Phœbus was apt to feel more kindly towards his nephew when the latter was absent than during his visits to Deepdene.

There could be no real sympathy between these two men of the same blood and name, but so different from one another. In them the old generation and the new were brought face to face. A better type than Sir Phœbus of the *petit-mâitre* and fine gentleman of the frivolous Georgian epoch, could hardly have been found in Her Majesty's dominions. He was old now, and acid of

temper, gouty, asthmatic, peevish, the victim of half-a-score real or fancied ailments. But he had been suppleness itself, as to his moral backbone, and as pliant as to his physical spine as stock and stays, three under-waistcoats, and excruciating boots, permitted. He had fawned and flattered, back-bitten and sneered, had been a dandy of some mark, an adorer of the sex feminine, an authority on fashion and the musical glasses. He had patronized the arts and the *belles lettres*. He had even condescended to write little sentimental sonnets, that his brother dandies had pronounced 'monsous fine.' He had a torpid conscience and a sensitive vanity; and had withal as supreme a conviction of his own unapproachable excellence and wisdom and experience, as would have done credit to a Mikado of Japan.

If Sir Phœbus respected anything but rank and wealth, it was the superficial grace

that in his eyes distinguished the gentleman from the plebeian world beyond the pale of elegance. And it was on this head that his nephew gave him the most serious umbrage. The old-world fine gentleman could not appreciate that the modern swell is on the whole a vast improvement upon the selfish dandy of the bygone school. It was nothing to him that his large-limbed young kinsman, stalwart, brave, and honourable, was kinder, honester, and more manly in act and word than the lispng bucks who dubbed George 'First Gentleman.' He could not forgive Hugh the very simplicity of speech, the easy temper, the careless attitudes, the sincere if semi-ignorant wish to do what was right, a wish quite touchingly exhibited by some of his compeers, but which to the baronet was caviare indeed. Even the guardsman's firm tread was distasteful to the elderly relative, who had tripped on pointed toe, like a pigeon

crossing a farmyard, over so many velvet carpets, and who had been painfully tutored by a French dancing-master in the difficult art of walking Bond Street with a grace. To sum up all, the affected elder generation, embodied in the little person of Sir Phœbus, could not excuse the absence of affectation in the new.

‘And, pray, have you given any consideration to the subject we discussed last night?’ snapped Sir Phœbus, when his cough left his voice again at liberty.

‘Yes, sir, I have—but I’m sorry—’ was the reply, which Captain Wyvil uttered with a visible hesitation.

‘Sorry? sorry! I never heard that phrase spoken unless it were coupled with some avowal of extravagance or some disobedient resolution—never! I do not encourage those about me to use so stale an apology for preferring their wilfulness to their duty. Sorry,

sir—did you never hear what Pozzo di Borgo said to the attaché who allowed himself to be robbed of the key to the official cipher—it was a Russian spy, a dooced clever fellow, Popanoff—Alexis Popanoff—afterwards sent to Siberia for treachery—who played old Pozzo that trick—but did you never hear what Pozzo said to the young donkey who excused himself by saying he was sorry?’

‘No, sir; I never did,’ answered the guardsman bluntly; ‘and I regret much that I should have the ill-luck to displease you. But what I say is a fact. I am very sorry to vex you, uncle, or to disappoint any hopes which you may kindly have formed on my behalf, but I’ve been thinking the matter over, and I cannot avail myself of your generous offer. I may as well tell the truth at once. It cannot be.’

The old baronet had a way of arching his eyebrows when he met with opposition, a

trick that he had learnt from some one or other of his old mentors, Talleyrand or Metternich, or another of those starred and ribboned statesmen whom men credited with almost superhuman astuteness. But the trick that had carried weight with it in the case of a great minister, whose beetling grey brows had been bent over the secret clauses of many a hard-fought treaty, and in whose plotting brain wily schemes were seething, was less effective in the present instance. Sir Phœbus, with his weak eyes and puckered eyelids, his peevish face and sour mouth, was rather an object of pity than of awe and respect. Yet he gave his nephew the benefit of the sternest look he could command, and the words dropped one by one, like molten lead, from his lips, when he at last condescended to speak.

‘Nephew Hugh, I was very fond of your father, my poor brother Harry, and for his

sake I have done what lay in my power to be of service to you, and to help you in life.'

'Yes, sir, you have. You have been very good to me,' said the young man, with real feeling in his tone and look, and he extended his hand to grasp those wan white fingers that were feebly fumbling with the clasp of a jewelled bonbonnière, the gift of an Austrian Archduchess, which lay upon the table before Sir Phœbus. But Sir Phœbus pettishly pushed away his nephew's proffered hand.

'And yet,' he resumed, 'the moment it is my turn to express a desire, a most natural and disinterested desire, to see you married and settled, you thwart my wishes with as little scruple, with as perfect indifference—'

'Upon my word, sir, you wrong me there,' interrupted Captain Wyvil, earnestly; 'it gives me pain to cause you annoyance or vexation, indeed it does.'

'You are vastly good, I am sure,' said his

uncle bitterly, and then he went on, his thin voice getting higher and shriller as he passionately proceeded :

‘ Nephew, they say you are my heir. Don’t you know it ? ’

‘ Do they, sir ? *I* don’t say it, and no one speaks on the subject to me, that I can answer for ; ’ said the guardsman, a sort of lazy scorn mingling involuntarily with his frank tones.

‘ But I swear, ’ pursued the old man, ‘ that unless you show a proper deference to my wishes in this affair, you shall not take a sixpence under my will—not a sixpence. You have the commission I bought for you, and you have the pittance your father left you, and you may live on your pay, and starve on it, and rot in jail, for aught I care. I’ll not leave you a shilling—an unmannerly, undutiful—ugh, ugh ! ’

The baronet could not finish his sentence,

so cruelly did the cough hack and tear at his meagre body.

‘My dear Sir Phœbus,’ said Captain Wyvil quietly; ‘it is a pity that there should be a misunderstanding between us. You are my father’s brother, and you have been very kind and liberal to me, and I can put up with any harsh words that you may give me, in remembrance of your great kindness. But you must not do me an injustice in your thoughts, even, by imagining that I count on the succession of your money. Upon my honour, I don’t. ’Till you spoke on the subject, yesterday, I had never given a thought to your savings, whatever they might be.’

‘My savings are a hundred and twenty-three thousand pounds, Hugh Wyvil, a hundred and twenty-three thousand!’ gasped out the old diplomatist; ‘and I do not suppose you would have long to wait—ugh, ugh! to wait—for them.’

He closed his eyes, and sat for awhile in silence, and when he spoke again his anger had cooled down, and his voice was less wrathfully shrill, and his accents almost persuasive.

‘Come, Hugh—come, dear lad—oblige me in this, and you’ll be glad, one day, not to have refused the old man the only favour he ever asked from you. I can’t leave you the estate—ugh!—Deepdene *must* go to George Wyvil,—stupid clown that he is. I can’t leave you to be master here after me, but I have scraped and saved, and I have a fortune to leave. Many a peer of England would be thankful of so much ready money—hard money—all ready to hand.’

The notion of the power and influence which this large sum could bestow on its possessor, actually brought a faint little flush to the baronet’s wrinkled cheek.

He resumed :

‘That’s not the whole of what I have to bestow, Hugh. There are leaseholds, and shares, and foreign securities, which will be very valuable in a few years. You may have it all, and my blessing along with it, if you will but listen to reason, and then you’ll be as rich, relatively speaking, as that hound George Wyvil, who’s dipped beyond redemption head over ears in debt, with his six brats,—and serve him right—ugh, ugh, ugh!’

Some men, and women too, have wonderful memories for petty injuries done to them in the dim past. At that very moment, as Sir Phœbus coughed out the name of the estranged brother, in whose involved circumstances he took so unholy a satisfaction, there rose up before his mental vision the image of a white plantation-gate in the Deepdene grounds, beside which gate a rough lad, at home from Harrow for his holidays, had just inflicted a bloody nose upon a slim stripling

in the most spotless of buff waistcoats and the glossiest of Hessian boots. Irreverent George had bantered his brother's legitimate pride in the possession of these boots, new from London, and in the virgin freshness of the mode. Phœbus had undertaken to reprove his junior's petulance, and had been worsted both in a verbal and a pugilistic trial of force. And at seventy years and more, the old diplomatist's feeble anger still smouldered against unrespective George.

‘Uncle, we had better understand each other at once,’ said the guardsman, gently but firmly. ‘Last night, you made me a very liberal proposition. You offered to settle two thousand a-year upon me, on condition that——but I hardly think, and I hardly thought, then, that it is fair to bring a lady's name into a discussion of this sort, especially when the lady seems to have no voice in the matter.’

‘The Archdeacon answers for his daughter. She has been well brought up; she is a dutiful girl, and will be guided by her parents. She likes you well enough. But, by George, sir, she has been educated on such sound principles, it’s my belief Eleanor Thrale would marry a chimney-sweep if her father bade her.’

Captain Wyvil could not repress a smile.

‘The young lady’s docility does her honour,’ he said; ‘and the Archdeacon’s choice of myself, as a representative of the chimney-sweep, — as a possible son-in-law, I mean, — does infinite honour to me also. But I have not the smallest intention of proposing to marry Miss Thrale.’

‘No intention, nephew; and pray why?’ said the baronet, drawing himself upright in his easy chair.

Captain Wyvil laughed.

‘The old story, sir, a difference of taste. I have no earthly objection to make to Miss Thrale, for whom I have the highest respect, but I don’t love her, that’s all. And I never mean to marry any woman that I could not and did not love.’

‘Vastly sentimental and boyish and absurd,’ sneered Sir Phœbus; ‘I’ve always noticed, in my own slight experience, which perhaps seems trifling to a member of your own far wiser generation, that love matches did not turn out the best. I could tell you of fifty cases in point. There was Miss Scamperley, who bolted to Gretna with young Lord Mullington. She led Mullington a deuce of a life, and he was uncommonly glad, I can tell you, when my lady went off with that Irish captain—what’s his name—but I noted it down on the margin of the “Peerage” yonder, and——’

The old man’s memory was tying itself up

into mental knots, as such memories will, but suddenly he remembered the purport of his discourse. 'No, no, Hugh,' he said, coaxingly; 'don't be a fool, quarrelling with your bread and butter. Miss Thrale is a pretty girl, fine eyes, and beautiful complexion and hair, and will be a splendid woman in a couple of years' time. See here, the Archdeacon and I have arranged it all. I'll give you two thousand a-year. He agrees to hand you over a cheque for ten thousand on the wedding-day. The rest will be settled on the lady, as is but fair, and it won't be under thirty thousand. Come, wealth and good looks, and good principles, all awaiting your acceptance. Say Yes, and ride over to Pollard Causeway this very afternoon, and let me see you married and established before I shut my old eyes on the world, Hugh. Why, who knows, George has but one son, all the rest are girls; your

children might be the baronets, after all, boy!’

‘I am very sorry,’ said Hugh Wyvil, sadly but resolutely.

Sir Phœbus drew himself up as if his spine had been a steel spring, and his wrinkles seemed to grow deeper, and his voice shriller, as he broke in upon his nephew’s hesitating speech: ‘Sorry again! rebellious, rather! Have a care, Hugh! On my soul, I’ll not bear contradiction in a thing I’ve set my heart upon. If you would marry Miss Thrale—’

‘And that I certainly cannot, will not do,’ rejoined the guardsman, whose colour heightened as his uncle’s tone grew threatening.

‘Are you engaged to—in love with—anyone else?’ snapped Sir Phœbus. ‘Have you seen somebody you like better than Eleanor?’

‘No, sir. I am free from all ties,’ answered the guardsman.

Perhaps as he spoke he was thinking of certain soft brown eyes, of a sweet little face, shaded by rippling braids of shining chesnut hair, that he had seen but for a short time, but which haunted him, somehow.

‘And yet you will not fulfil the engagement which I have contracted in your name and for your benefit? If so, nephew Hugh—’

‘Excuse me, Sir Phœbus, but I must ask by what right—’

Captain Wyvil had got so far in his imprudent retort, when the door was opened, and Tupper appeared.

‘Mr. Orpington, Sir Phœbus,’ said the valet.

‘Ah! to be sure. Show him in,’ said the baronet, instantly recovering the varnish of suavity which was to him as a natural protection. ‘You will not mind leaving us for

awhile, nephew. Think of what I have said for your own sake, my dear boy. I shall expect a final decision before dark. Till then—'

And as Captain Wyvil withdrew, the surgeon entered the room.

CHAPTER XII.

MR. ORPINGTON'S ADVICE.

‘PULSE high, feeble, and yet a great deal too quick; skin feverish, hot, and dry. You have been imprudent, Sir Phœbus, I’m afraid.’

And as Mr. Orpington spoke, he looked with steady professional scrutiny at the aged patient, whose lean wrist was imprisoned in the gripe of the surgeon’s strong fingers.

‘That cough, too,’ resumed the doctor, after listening attentively to the sharp hacking sounds of a fresh paroxysm that tore and struggled in the baronet’s bronchial passages, as if the weary old lungs were expending

their last energies in the effort. 'That cough, too, tells tales.'

'What tales, Mr. Conjuror; and what the deuce do you mean by talking your medical jargon to me, sir, as if I was one of the poor drivelling old idiots that you physic by contract in your workhouse at Birkham Union, and who take a doctor for a wizard, eh?' snarled Sir Phœbus.

He was generally civil to his medical attendant, in attention, at any rate, but now he was in an evil humour, and the remembrance of his nephew's contumacy, rankling in his mind, overpowered his wish to be dignified and courteous. But the master of Deepdene was usually polite, condescendingly polite at times, frankly so at others, to the Whiteparish surgeon. And this was a noteworthy fact in itself, for the baronet's habitual tartness of manner and insolence of speech were modified out of compliment to

John Orpington's individual character, and not in the least for the sake of his profession. That profession, indeed, Sir Phœbus despised heartily, at least, when its representative came in humbler guise than that of a court physician, whose soft hand turned all it touched, Midas fashion, to gold, and about whom clung somewhat of the magic atmosphere that invests royalty. A country surgeon, however, was in his eyes a very inferior animal indeed, and to be treated according to its grade in creation. Mr. Orpington's predecessor had not seldom been used to impart to his bosom friends, over the social glass of gin-and-water, that Sir Phœbus used him worse than a dog. It was true, but it was the doctor's fault as well as the patient's. If a man offers himself as a football, he can hardly blame the kicker. And Mr. Joyce had licked, metaphorically, the foot that spurned him,

whereas John Orpington did nothing of the sort.

John's sound sense, his high character for integrity, his reputation for skill, all these helped him to win the respect of his one great patient. But all these together would hardly have turned the scale, had they not been supplemented by John's dogged independence of bearing. Sir Phœbus had not, during his diplomatic experiences, acquired any very high opinion of human deserts. In his eyes most honest men were but specious humbugs or undetected rogues. But here was Orpington, of whom all men spoke well, who never flattered, never fawned, never swerved an inch from the path that he trod so sturdily, and whose incurable practice of outspoken truthfulness stamped him as sterling metal. Sir Phœbus was justified by the lessons of his past life in setting down Plain John

Orpington as no counterfeit, but a very honest man.

The surgeon smiled grimly in answer to his patient's impertinent speech.

‘If you would like to know what tales your cough tells me, Sir Phœbus, there is no mystery in the matter. First, instead of sticking to the drops I sent, and which would have done you good, you have been taking a heap of French bonbons, and chocolate pastilles, and all the trash yonder,—pointing to the jewelled bonbonnière, with its perfumed sugar-plums and meretricious finery of decoration,—which do you harm. Secondly, I advised quiet. You have been exciting yourself. It is half nervous that complaint of yours, but I tell you plainly that nerves can kill, and that over-excitement will kill you one of these days—’

‘Unless I obey your wise—ugh, ugh—your wise directions, eh, doctor?’ sneered Sir

Phœbus, striving hard to keep up his superiority, as a man of station and a man of the world, over this rough parochial drudge.

‘Just so, mine or another’s,’ answered the surgeon, very coolly.

One talisman there was whereby John Orpington asserted his right to decent treatment at the hands of his territorial neighbour. He manifested not the very slightest anxiety to keep his post as medical adviser to the solitary great man within his meagre range of practice. When Sir Phœbus was peculiarly unreasonable, railing against Mr. Orpington’s prescriptions, impugning his skill, and blaming him for want of success, he was always disarmed, and reduced to apologize, by the downright simplicity with which the surgeon suggested that his visits should cease. There was Mr. Parry at Danethorpe, a skilful man, with twice the patients and twice the income of the needy Whiteparish doctor.

There was Dr. Chase at Lincoln, a physician who felt the pulses of half the landed gentry adjacent. Mr. Orpington was ready and willing to hand over the case to either of these professional seniors, while he would always be glad to give Sir Phœbus such poor benefit as there might be in his opinion of his state,—but as a friend always,—strictly as a friend. Paid professional attendance, after the words which Sir Phœbus had used, was altogether out of the question. And Sir Phœbus never failed to withdraw the offensive expressions that in his petulance he had let fall, and a grudging apology was given and accepted.

‘Umph!’ said Sir Phœbus, which latter semi-articulate grunt signified a wish to parley. ‘I’m out of sorts this morning, doctor. That cub of a nephew—infernal young puppy—but I declare I don’t know what the world is coming to now-a-days. “Seniores priores”

was the rule in my younger days, but by Jupiter, sir, they've reversed the arrangement now.'

'Don't excite yourself. I must use a medical man's privilege with you, Sir Phœbus, while you continue to place confidence in me, and I tell you frankly that you do very wrong to hold conversations of an irritating nature with any person. And I think Captain Wyvil would act more considerately in avoiding such topics for the future,' said Mr. Orpington, in his cool way.

At this Sir Phœbus burst out impetuously: 'Very easy for you to say so, doctor; but, by George, it's hard, after the sacrifices I have made, after denying myself the establishment that a man of my position ought to keep up, and after saving and screwing for that boy's sake, it is hard to meet with such base and black ingratitude. If you were in my case,

you would find it easier to preach patience than to practise it, I imagine.'

And here the cough came on again, and Sir Phœbus, from long habit, plunged his shaking fingers into the ornamented box of sugar-plums, under the very eyes of his doctor. He had spoken with shrill eagerness, and perhaps with some pathos, too, in his thin voice ; for he really had a regard for his nephew, and he really believed for the moment in the truth of his own assertion, that he had saved for Hugh's sake. Now the fact was that Sir Phœbus Wyvil had done nothing of the sort. To pare and scrape and lop off little excrescences of expenditure had been a labour of love to him. He would have taken equally good care of his store had his brother Harry left no son behind him. But though the pleasure of saving was to him its own reward, he had fully meant Hugh to have the profit.

And he pardonably mixed up the two motives, and shuffled the more creditable one to the top, as mortals are apt to do.

John Orpington sat thoughtfully, biting his nails. It was one of his maxims never to meet a confidence half-way—far less, to sue for one. There are many who must have a confessor, and who, failing priest, parson, and attorney, tell their griefs and wrongs to their medical attendant. And Sir Phœbus had one of those half-feminine dispositions which seek for a confidant, as ivy seeks for a support. He had often dropped hints of his dissatisfaction with his nephew and presumed heir, and of the causes of this quasi-hostile sentiment. But he had never met with any encouragement to pour the whole history of his griefs into the ears of his stern auditor. The Whiteparish surgeon seemed not only to be above vulgar curiosity, but to regard with aversion the prospect of being mixed up,

even in the passive character of a listener, with family quarrels. And this reticence had impressed Sir Phœbus not a little. The smooth healers he had known in his youth had been greedy of secrets. Much of their connection was kept together by their intimate knowledge of the frailties of this patient or that, of the blot on such-and-such escutcheons that should have been stainless, of the skeletons in the locked cupboards of more than one mansion whose double doors always flew open at the doctor's knock. And the old diplomatist had been piqued that the man whom he privately respected above all other men, the one honest soul that this supple Diogenes of the Foreign Office had discovered after a life of lantern-carrying, should care so little to know the inner mind of his chief neighbour.

Sir Phœbus formed a sudden resolve. He would tell everything to Orpington, a shrewd,

hard-headed fellow, though without the finesse necessary to conceal his thoughts; for such was the estimate which the old gentleman, familiar with men and cities, had formed of the homely village practitioner. And he plunged into the case at once, and gave the surgeon a somewhat diffuse, but perfectly intelligible account of the whole transaction. He was excited, feeble, and unusually roused, or he would never have done what he did. But, as it was, he told all.

How Hugh, a good lad very likely, but ill-mannered, careless, and horribly egotistical (that was the portrait that his uncle sketched of his moral qualities), was throwing away a chance of establishing himself in life, and at the same time baulking his elderly kinsman's last wish, and depriving him of his only anticipated gratification. This gratification, it was soon pretty clear, was of a twofold nature, partly benevolent, partly malignant.

In wishing to see Hugh settled, steadied, and well-to-do in the world, the baronet's aspirations were blameless—officious, perhaps, but eminently kind. But it was not enough that Hugh should found a junior branch of the old Wyvil stock. Hugh's prosperity must also be such as to inflict the pangs of envy and mortification upon clownish George, the baronet expectant, now a heavy elderly man, with empty pockets, and a craving family of girls. George must have Deepdene and the honours of the Bloody Hand. That was unavoidable; for of his surviving his polished senior there was little doubt. But Deepdene had been so managed that it would be anything but a bed of roses to a new and needy owner. The estate was out of order; the lands were mostly let on absurdly long leases, and the fines and bonuses paid by the incoming tenantry for the easy terms of their tenures, these had been swept up to swell the

personalty of Sir Phœbus. George, with his debts, and his dilapidated property, and no timber fit for felling, would find his hands tied in every direction, and might well consider Hugh Wyvil as a relatively richer man than his chief.

Then, George had but one son, and Hugh's chance of the baronetcy was not so very remote, after all. The entail was absolute. Captain Wyvil, or his son, or his grandson, might very possibly succeed to Deepdene and the family honours; and to a proprietor whose purse was a long one the old estate would prove a valuable property. With this view it was that Sir Phœbus had exerted himself to make up a match; or, as he phrased it, to negotiate an alliance between the house of Wyvil and that of Thræle. Strictly speaking, and viewing the matter through the gules and azure spectacles of the Heralds' College, the

house of Thrale was not a house at all. Archdeacon Thrale's grandfather was a nameless myth, lost in the mists of eighteenth-century tradition. But his father had been a man of some note, one of the last of that gallant confraternity of ragged Whittingtons who valiantly tramped up the weary road that led to wonderful London and its golden pavements, and who got honest employment for the asking, swept out a warehouse, married their masters' daughters, and came to be Lord Mayors. Lord Mayor Thrale's property was divided amongst his numerous children, and the Rev. Peter's share was a comfortable one; but his best endowment was in the fact that his wife was a bishop's daughter. Hence Dr. Thrale, mounting ever higher on the hierarchal ladder, blossomed into a full-blown pluralist, such as cannot bloom in our degenerate days. He had several livings. He was a

canon of this chapter and a prebendary of that, a Royal chaplain, an archdeacon. To have reckoned up all his stalls and benefices would have taken some time. A wild story was extant, the purport of which was that a facetious friend whom the Archdeacon had requested to order dinner for him at a roadside hotel in the old posting days, had so well discharged the office that Dr. Thrale found a long table laid out, and was told that one cover was for the Archdeacon, one for the rector of Twigsden, a third for the Vicar of Foxley, a fourth napkin for the senior canon of Blanchminster, and so forth. But there were very few persons who would have been bold enough to take such a liberty with the stately absorber of so much ecclesiastical preferment.

Dr. and Mrs. Thrale had plenty of money, and but two children to inherit after them. One of these, a wild youth, who had gone

astray in the most unaccountable manner, and who had come back to Lincolnshire in the character of the Prodigal Son over and over again, only to depart with full pockets on a fresh career of blindhookey, German *trente et quarante*, the turf, and the Rue de Bréda, was likely enough to die before his parents. And in that case pretty, obedient, demure Miss Thrale would be a great heiress. As it was, her father, who was the only neighbour with whom Sir Phœbus was on terms of frigid good-will, was ready to settle a large sum upon her if she married the baronet's favourite nephew. It was a grand thing for a Thrale to mate with a Wyvil of Deepdene.

All this Sir Phœbus, in rather a prolix manner, but very explicitly, communicated to Mr Orpington, and ended the narration by asking the surgeon's advice. Hugh was an obstinate, good-for-nothing dog, his uncle

said. He would not propose for Miss Thrale. And the baronet saw himself not only baffled as to his pet scheme for his nephew's happiness and his brother's confusion, but also shrank from avowing to the Archdeacon that he had failed. The two elders had settled the affairs of the young ones in antique fashion, very much to their, the elders', satisfaction; and now Sir Phœbus would have the vexatious confession to make, that he had not been a plenipotentiary after all. What would Thrale say? He was ready to fulfil his part of the contract. *His* child was dutiful and obedient. But Hugh? Oh, it was shameful, it was cruel, unpardonable of Hugh to put his kinsman in such a position. Sir Phœbus was actually crying at the thought of the manner in which he had been thwarted. What would the doctor advise?

The doctor had sat quietly biting his

nails and listening with a stern patience to every word the old diplomatist chose to utter.

‘I don’t like giving advice,’ he said, almost defiantly; ‘the medicine’s apt to be unpalatable.’

Sir Phœbus, however, grew eager for counsel in proportion as the surgeon hesitated to speak.

‘Well,’ said the latter, at length, ‘mind, I have no concern in the matter, can have none. But, if I were you, I think I should be firm. I am sure I should. And yet it is a pity to enter into harassing altercations. Much better settle it by letter. Captain Wyvil will soon be leaving Deepdene—he never stays long. Write to him, and, temperately but decisively, announce your determination. He will give way if you don’t, of course. It is a contest of will!’

‘A contest of will!’ repeated Mr. Orpington, between his shut teeth, as he returned Captain Wyvil’s half mechanical salutation when he drove past that young gentleman moodily lounging beneath the leafless trees of the park. ‘A contest of will!’ he again repeated, as his gig jolted its rough way down the ill-kept road that led to the demesne, and that suffered, as all things animate and inanimate suffered on the Deepdene estate, in consequence of the parsimony of the tenant for life. ‘My volition pitted against that of yonder padded and essenced old dotard, against the muddled mind of that heavy dragoon. Old men, lonely and querulous, have made queer last testaments before to-day, and he has dropped hints—hints. I never forget!’

And during all the rest of the surgeon’s homeward drive, his dark brows were knit into a heavy frown, and his iron mouth

was firmer than ever, while from his deepset eyes there glared forth that resolute ruthless gleam of pitiless determination that had startled his shrinking ward on her first evening beneath her guardian's roof.

CHAPTER XIII.

MISS BRIDGET'S CONFIDENCE.

‘JOHN would be very much displeased.’

Miss Bridget was the speaker, and her words were addressed as much, so it would seem, to herself as to Blanche Morton. It was early on that wintry morning which succeeded the first night that Blanche had spent at Whiteparish, the morning of the day that witnessed the unsatisfactory interview between Sir Phœbus and his nephew. The pale raw light was still feebly fighting against the darkness of night and mist, when the Orpingtons had assembled as usual around their early breakfast table, but the new mem-

ber of the household was not present. Miss Orpington herself had undertaken to inquire the cause of her guest's absence, and she had found Blanche, trembling and pale, trying to hurry her toilet, but with nerves so shaken by what she had undergone, that her glossy chesnut tresses escaped again and again from the hands that strove to adjust their braids.

‘What is this?’ asked Miss Bridget, sternly, and then immediately added, ‘How ill you look. Or has something frightened you?’

Blanche sat down, sobbing, and it was not difficult for her grim hostess to wring from her a full account of the occurrences of the night, of the shrieks that had broken her rest, of her attempt to solve the meaning of those ill-omened cries, and, lastly, of the anguish of terror in which she had fled back to her chamber, pursued by the utterances of a rage and hate that seemed more than human. All this Blanche told in answer to Miss Or-

pington's rigorous cross-examination, and an impartial observer, had one been present, might have noticed that this strange recital caused the hearer no surprise. Annoyance, displeasure, and some alarm, were stamped upon the rugged lineaments of the surgeon's elder sister, but not amazement by any means.

‘You did not open the door?’ asked Miss Bridget, quickly, as Blanche finished her reluctant narration.

‘No;’ was the girl's answer.

‘Thank Heaven, as long as you live, that you did not!’ exclaimed the gaunt iron-grey woman, with an impulsiveness very foreign to her ordinary self-control. Then she appeared to regret the words that had just left her lips.

‘It is all nonsense,’ she said, in her authoritative way; ‘you were flurried and excited; the night was a stormy one, and the

sound of the wind among the trees and outbuildings of this old place must have made you fanciful. It was all a dream.'

Blanche shook her head.

'It was not a dream. I wish it had been one;' she said, very gently, but with a quiet certainty of conviction that impressed Miss Orpington somewhat.

'Now, child,' said Miss Bridget, laying her her bony hand on Blanche's wrist, 'listen to me. It was no dream. It was a disagreeable circumstance, that might have—but no matter! It is over now. It shall not occur again. But I want you to promise not to speak of it. Keep what has happened a secret, and I will prevent its repetition. Not a word to anyone, of what you heard last night. You need not ask me what it was. There are reasons—all families have their secrets. But my brother would be vexed if he heard that you had been disturbed in this

manner. John would be very much displeased.'

She did not speak cajolingly, nor imperiously, but in a doggedly earnest tone, and it was plain that she believed in the truth of her own words. The last sentence was uttered almost in soliloquy, but presently she bent her cold gaze upon Blanche, and said :

' And in this house we all try to please John Orpington. So we did when our parents were living. John's word was always law. It is so still, as you will find out. A better and a trustier brother never lived, but there are points on which I should give up my own desires, as a matter of course, where John is concerned. This is one of them. Please to promise me that you will be silent, on which condition I promise you that you shall be disturbed no more. Is it a bargain? '

And the bony fingers tightened their grasp on Blanche's arm.

‘Bridget, what keeps you so long? Is anything wrong?’ screamed Miss Barbara from the stairs. Her elder sister thrust her head out of the half-open door of Blanche’s room.

‘Go down, Barbara,’ she said, more impatiently than usual. ‘Give John his breakfast. Leave Blanche to me. She is a little tired and nervous, but I shall get her to come down directly.’

Barbara obeyed: she always obeyed when she knew, by the harsh metallic ring in her sister’s voice, that the stronger and shrewder spirit of the two expected her to comply without query or remonstrance.

‘Is it a bargain?’ resumed Miss Bridget, in a business-like tone. Two great tears gathered in Blanche’s pretty brown eyes, and fell in a glittering shower from the eyelashes to which they clung, as, with a smothered sob, she bent her head in assent.

‘You little goose!’ said Miss Bridget,

patting the soft pale cheek with her own hard fingers; 'I'll take care no one shall tease you to-day.' Roughly, but not unkindly, after her own cast-iron fashion, she helped the girl to twist up her comely light-brown hair, and to adjust her dress, and then she led Blanche down stairs, just as John Orpington, whose mornings belonged rather to his patients than himself, was rising from the table after the conclusion of his frugal and hurried meal.

'You look tired, Miss Blanche, and your hand is dry and hot. The journey, eh? A day's rest will do you good,' said the surgeon, bluff but smiling, and he softened his voice a little as he spoke to Blanche, as we instinctively do when we address those in sorrow or sickness. But his eye was as piercing as ever, and as it rested on Blanche, the girl shuddered, as if by some subtle power it could read her thoughts.

'I am afraid you did not sleep well,' said

plain John Orpington, as his searching eye roved from Blanche to his sister's face, and Miss Bridget took upon herself to reply. Then the surgeon left the room, and very soon his tall gig and the hard-working horse in the shafts came round to the door, and off Mr. Orpington rattled on his daily round of professional duty.

All that day Blanche Morton, scared, ill, and helpless, found herself surrounded by a sort of barely perceptible protection against annoyance. Miss Barbara had desired to take possession of her and her wardrobe, to pass all her wearing apparel and ornaments under review, and to overhaul the memory and mind of her young guest with as unceremonious an indulgence of grasping curiosity, as she proposed to herself in the case of Blanche's trunks and dressing case. And however much the doctor's ward might have suffered under the ordeal, it is difficult to

conjecture how she could have escaped from her persecutrix, save for Miss Bridget's interference. Miss Bridget quietly but effectively interposed between her demonstrative sister and the orphan girl, that poor little waif that had somehow drifted, so to speak, within her jurisdiction. And though Barbara buzzed about the room like an angry wasp, and made little spiteful speeches from time to time, she did not torment the new comer one tithe so much as she would have done, but for Bridget.

Yet to Blanche Morton it was a melancholy day enough, the sad forerunner of many weary days to come. It seemed as if the long morning would never be over. The household into the midst of which she had suddenly been cast was of a type new to her. In her inexperience she had as yet formed no conception of the bare blank monotony, the rugged discomfort, the petty cares and petty

disputes, the sordid cares and anxieties, which to a large section of womankind mean—life. She did not know that to many a family of middle-class English, life implied a hard struggle to pinch, and save, and haggle, and make a shilling do the work of two, and yet to keep up an appearance of gentility through all this toil of Sisyphus. For the first time she gained a glimpse of the tough *melée* to which so large a proportion of the poorer professional classes, starved down as by a principle of natural selection, seem to be condemned—a life of denial to themselves and others, of bargaining, calculation, and distrust.

Poor little Blanche! She knew nothing of English ways, or the routine of English life. For anything she could tell, all British homes were such as this in which she now cowered, like a dove in a nest of hawks. How could she know that in the very stratum of society to which the Orpingtons belonged, there were

thousands of dwellings where she might have lived out her innocent days in love and peace, where there were joyous gatherings around a humble hearth, and where wrath and greed found no welcome. How could she know of the pleasant country parsonages, the fair white cottages nestling among the mountains of the lake district, or overlooking the ever-changing surface of the shining sea—of the myriad homes in town and country, where cheap pleasures were not despised, and where flowers and music, and light hearts, and pure enjoyment, were in plenty.

Such as this had been Blanche's old home in far-off Ceylon. There had been no splendour, certainly, but the impress of cultivated minds and of an innate refinement had made itself felt in all things. But from that dream of a happy childhood it was a harsh awakening to be flung into the grim dwelling of the guardian whom her father—himself

a trustful man, instinctively honourable in his own dealings, and slow to think evil—had selected. At Whiteparish there seemed to be but one view of household management, and that implied the existence of an eternal internecine strife with servants and tradesmen, endless vigilance, constant counterplots to match the supposed stratagems of those who sought to overreach, and a perpetual guard against domestic enemies. The gaunt sisters went to and fro, discussed and scolded, bargained and inspected, and flitted backwards and forwards between the house and the village shops. And then dinner-time came, but no John Orpington, and, as often occurred, the female members of the family dined alone.

It was deep in the afternoon, and the shadows were falling on the vast expanse of the olive-green fen country below and the bleak hills above, when Miss Orpington, who

had for some time been sitting thoughtfully frowning over her knitting needles, seized the occasion of her sister's absence from the room to turn abruptly to Blanche.

‘I have been thinking whether I should tell you anything or not,’ she said, in her usual manner, ‘and I have made up my mind. Come nearer. Don't cry; I shall not hurt you.’

Blanche crept a little nearer to the tall gaunt woman with the stony eyes. She did not dislike Miss Bridget by any means so much as she did Barbara of the false smile and clumsy playfulness. At least, there was nothing feigned about the elder of the surgeon's sisters, about that stern she-cynic with the leonine head and the grizzled mane of rough hair.

‘You were frightened last night,’ said Miss Bridget, bluntly. ‘You might have been more than frightened. It's well you didn't

open that door. Once her hands had closed about your neck, and she had seen your scared face, nothing could have saved you. She's only quiet with those that don't fear her. Barbara never ventures to go in. Margaret the maid, and I, and John—she minds us, but no one else.'

Fifty half-shaped thoughts, with a fear in each, passed through Blanche's mind during the brief pause that succeeded. Yet it was not long before Miss Orpington spoke again.

'When I promised you, child, that you should not be disturbed again, my intention was to remove the cause of your alarm to some other part of the house or outbuildings, but that would, on consideration, be very inconvenient. Besides, I could not make such a change without consulting John, and he always shows a very marked dislike to hear her very name mentioned. And that is odd, for he was fond of her once, fonder

than of either of us two elder ones, and Barbara used to be jealous of the preference that he gave Amelia. Amelia——are you listening?’ and the bony fingers closed in a tighter clutch on Blanche’s arm.

Miss Orpington did not wait for an answer, but resumed :

‘Barbara will come back directly, so I must be quick. Without beating about the bush, I am going to tell you the straightforward truth. Amelia was our youngest sister—we were four in all—John and we three women. Amelia was quite a young woman still, several years younger than any of us, a fine tall girl, with high spirits and a sweet temper, unlike us in that too. Amelia was engaged to be married to William Ellis, mate of a merchant brig, one of our coasting vessels, for we lived at Cromer then, which is our native place. Ellis was a young man of very respectable connections, a fine

young sailor to look at, and folks used to say that he and Amelia Orpington would make as handsome and loving a couple as need be. Well, our father had died just the year before, and he had died bankrupt, and all our troubles came upon us at once. John was our only support. He, dear fellow, had given up the army to come back to our dark home and maintain us by his honest labour, and very hard it was to rub on, with all our care and thrift and with all his exertions. The luckiest of us three, as Barbara used often to say in her cross way, was Amelia, for she had her sweetheart, a good lad, I own that, who had not forsaken her when so many of our fairweather friends fell off from us, for people blamed my father for not having given up the business before the debts had grown to what they did.

‘Ellis was willing and ready to take Amelia without a penny to her portion;

though my poor father had promised, long ago, that he would give his daughter two hundred pounds on the wedding-day, and it had been agreed that at his wife's wish William should give up the sea, and take a farm. He had some money of his own—a few hundreds his grandfather left him, and this would suffice to buy stock, and so at last he signed the lease of a farm in the same county—Norfolk—and the day for the marriage was fixed.

‘There was some delay and difficulty in getting back the money, which had been invested on mortgage by a Norwich lawyer, but at last William came into our house, laughing, and showed us his pocketbook, stuffed with bank notes. How much there was I never knew, but something close upon four hundred pounds. That was on a Wednesday afternoon, and Ellis was to have been married to Amelia on the following

Saturday. He was in great good-humour, I remember, laughing and joking like a school-boy, and insisted on ordering in some champagne from the Rose and Crown, that we might all drink the toast of "Speed the plough," and wish him and Amy good luck as farmers.

'That very night, a summer's evening it was, and darkness did not come till late, my sister came in with a white face like a ghost's, and sank down and fainted. When she came to herself a little she told us that William was lying under the cliffs, having fallen over the precipice. John was from home, and Barbara and I had enough to do to attend to Amelia, who went from one fit into another, until a brain fever set in, and brought her to death's door. We could just gather from her broken words, before she grew delirious, that she had seen her lover fall over the edge of the cliff, and that the

shock had been too much for her to bear, poor thing!

‘It was all too true, and when I went out, perhaps an hour later, to send help to the sufferer, in case that fearful fall had not proved fatal at once, I met men carrying William’s dead body up to the inn that he had left that day full of hope and life. His spine was broken, and his head had been dashed upon a rock, so that death must have been instantaneous. How the accident happened no one but Amelia knew, but it was easy to guess. He was waiting for her at their usual place of meeting, on the cliff path half-a-mile from the town, overlooking the beach, at a place called Spanish Wreck, from a vessel lost thereabouts years before, and in the dim light he must have missed his footing on the narrow tract, and fallen headlong to the beach.

‘What is curious was, that the pocketbook

and the money were missing. William's purse, with three sovereigns and some silver, was found in his pocket, as well as his watch and chain, untouched, but the large sum of money had disappeared mysteriously. Most likely it was stolen, for the coastguard sailors who were the first to find him had remarked that there were deep footprints in the soft sand close by. And it was thought afterwards that some vagabond gipsies who had been prowling about the shore for weeks, picking up driftwood and shells, or digging into the cliff for fossils and the jet that is often discovered on our Norfolk coast, had seen Ellis fall, and run up and rifled his body as he lay; but if so, it is strange they did not take his watch and purse. Perhaps they were disturbed. At any rate, whether the suspicion that fell on them were just or not, they disappeared about the same time, and the robber of poor dead William—if

indeed he were robbed, as seems likely—was never brought to justice. But of foul play no one was ever suspected. It must have been an accident, nor was there anything wonderful in the fact of a chance stumble in the dusk on that giddy cliff path proving fatal.

‘How shocked poor John was, to be sure, when he heard the news. He did not come in till late, having been detained longer than he had reckoned on at a farmhouse inland, where his employer had sent him—he was assistant to one of our apothecaries then—and it was eleven o’clock before he got home. He was very much grieved. I never saw him so agitated before, for, as you must have noticed, he is very self-collected and cool, and has great command over his words and looks. But I think he was the more sorry for the dreadful misfortune, because of late there had been something of a coolness

between William and him ; I don't know on what subject, but they had high words once or twice. However, they had made it up again, and on that very day at dinner I remember that poor Ellis filled John's glass and his own, saying, in his hearty way,

“Come, John, we're to be brothers very soon. Shake hands and drink to the drowning of all past misunderstandings between us two.”

‘ And they shook hands across the table and touched their glasses together. Little did we all think when John went out soon after dinner, that when he came back he would find his brother-in-law a corpse, and his favourite sister ill of brain fever. John brought her round, she would have died but for his skill and patience. But if he saved her life, he could not save her reason. She became a hopeless maniac, generally quiet, sometimes fretful, now and then violent. You went

to her door, my dear, when the dangerous paroxysm was upon her. We have all cause to be thankful that you did not open it.'

'She is—is here then?' asked Blanche, with awestruck face, but feeling that sense of half-conscious relief which we all experience when our vague apprehensions are ended by the revelation of any the most terrible truth.

'She is here,' said Miss Bridget, gloomily, but not harshly now. Since she had commenced the narration of this sad and simple history of family troubles, her eye and voice had softened perceptibly, and it was evident that her rock-hard nature was not proof against the touch of domestic affection. 'She is here—though few know the fact. Please to remember that her presence here is a secret. It would be very disagreeable to us all that it should be blabbed about the countryside. Gossip, all the world over, is

commonly spiced with ill-nature, as my father used to say. But I have your promise not to tattle about our affairs, have I not ?'

Blanche bent her head. Miss Bridget laid her broad bony hand, almost caressingly, on the gleaming chesnut hair.

'Poor child!' said the gaunt woman, in a sort of scornful pity sprung from a variety of causes too subtly blended to be wholly understood by even herself. Then she went on :

'I have not much more to tell you. John's attention never relaxed until Amelia was well and strong, but her insanity was beyond his power to cure. I have heard that the mad sometimes take inexplicable aversions to those they had dearly loved. It was so in our sister's case. She hates John, or fears him, though I hardly know which, and he generally keeps out of her sight, since a visit from him seldom fails to excite her dreadfully. He had seen her yesterday, and this,

with the storm, combined no doubt to bring on a violent outbreak. But generally, she is like a lamb with me or with Margaret.

‘Soon after this great blow, some good luck came. John contrived to borrow a sum of money on easy terms from some old friend whom he had known when in the army, and who could afford to lend it on easy terms. It was not much, but it enabled him to pay off some pressing debts, and to purchase this Whiteparish practice, which was then for sale, and which my brother bought cheaply. We moved to Lincolnshire, and here I suppose we shall stay until something better turns up, perhaps a town practice or some hospital appointment, for John has talents, and deserves—hush! here comes Barbara—not a word. Remember, not a word!’

CHAPTER XIV.

BLANCHE'S GUARDIAN.

USE, which, as the copyslips were wont to tell us, lessens marvels, certainly smooths a rough path through life. The burden that at first appeared intolerable grows easy and light by degrees. Custom reconciles us to the ugly face, the bleak landscape, the uncongenial companion, that once jarred so forcibly on our sense of the fitness of things. And so it was with Blanche Morton, shut up at Whiteparish in the surgeon's uninviting dwelling, and without any more attractive society than that of the surgeon's sisters. Yet, as weeks went by, the gaunt old farm-

house seemed to grow less repulsive of aspect, the peculiarities of the grim spinsters were less noticed, and even the bare, cold, neutral-tinted life looked less unutterably desolate and melancholy than it had done during the first miserable days after Blanche's arrival.

Yet it was but a monotonous, vegetative existence, at the best. The master of the house seldom came home except to eat and sleep; the most of his waking hours were spent in hard work, for his practice was widening, though the profits did not increase in as rapid a ratio as the toil. Miss Bridget and Miss Barbara were much occupied with the pettiest of petty cares, and when bargains and errands and domestic supervision could no longer be spun out so as to improve the shining hours, the elder sister had her knitting, the younger her piano, her cosmetics, her wardrobe, and time hung heavily on the hands of neither.

Blanche was left very much to herself. She might read, or work, or sit utterly idle, or walk whither she pleased, without much comment. At first, Miss Bridget had propounded some schemes for initiating Blanche into the art and mystery of housekeeping after the Orpington pattern, but the pupil had shrunk from the novitiate, and the teacher had given up the idea of Blanche's tuition ; and Barbara had ceased to inflict her exuberant girlishness and sprightly conversation upon the young guest. She was often bitter and spiteful-tongued, but at least she spared the new comer her false professions of friendship at first sight. The truth was, that Miss Barbara had never forgiven Blanche the preference which the curate, Mr. Peters, had the bad tact to exhibit for her society on the first occasion of his drinking tea at Mr. Orpington's house after Blanche Morton became one of its inmates.

There was nothing remarkable about Mr. Peters, a plain, good, elderly young man, with a neat neckcloth and an ineradicable habit of blushing. He had taken a tolerable degree at the University, his abilities were respectable, and his character blameless, but he was pronounced not the sort of man to get on in the Church now-a-days. And, indeed, in a church militant, so very clumsy a combatant as the Rev. Thomas Peters was only fit for employment in the baggage-guard. His slow mind was too matter-of-fact to take in the bearings of any argument that could not be demonstrated by the help of angles and bases and sines and tangents— x plus a and a minus y . His sermons were exactly such dry bundles of morality as were turned out by the thousand cubic feet from the intellectual lathes of the eighteenth century. In conversation he was heavy in hand, though perfectly well-meaning and sincere. And he had been glad,

after one or two failures, to receive a Lincolnshire curacy and a stipend of two hundred a-year.

Mr. Peters had sought the acquaintance of the Orpington family on much the same principle that a traveller in the desert rushes to the muddy pool of the long-desired fountain, and fairly fights with Arabs and trampling, screaming camels for a share of the nauseous, brackish water that is more welcome to his parched throat than Veuve Clicquot's best. The water is bad, but there is no better to be had. Just so the Reverend Thomas was thankful for permission to sip weak tea of Miss Bridget's making, and to converse with the only educated family to be found in the parish. But Miss Barbara chose to believe that her own *beaux yeux* were the magnets that drew the curate to the Orpingtons' dwelling, and her fury was extreme when Mr. Peters naïvely devoted a

great deal more of his conversation to Miss Morton, and bestowed a great deal more praise on the song that Blanche was prevailed on to sing to the jingling accompaniment of Miss Barbara's piano, than that acid maiden deemed desirable. Poor Mr. Peters meant no harm. He had sense enough to recognize in Blanche a lady-like, sweet-mannered girl such as he had seen sometimes in his youth when visiting at the country mansions to which he was asked, and he turned in simple admiration to that fair white lilly-flower, unaware that his attentions would be resented by the thistle that flourished hard by. He was a modest man, and had no more notion that Miss Barbara aspired to be Mrs. Peters, than that some savage princess had fallen in love with his bluff photograph. He did not mean to marry anybody, unless he got a living and could afford connubial bliss. But he was punished by not getting another invitation

for a long, long while, and Miss Barbara never forgave Blanche Morton for what she called 'setting her cap at the curate.'

The ill-will of Miss Barbara was, however, in some respects, more endurable than her feigned friendship. The piercing cries and long-drawn moans that had broken Blanche Morton's rest on that first night, had never been renewed. Once or twice Blanche heard a faint sound of weeping, and at other times a low peal of joyless laughter followed by a vicious snarl, as of a famished wolf, echoed drearily along the cobwebbed passage that led to the padlocked room. But the poor maniac caused no such alarm as before. Her paroxysms of pain and fury were, it was to be hoped, of rare occurrence. The very presence of such an indweller in the house could not fail to throw a shadow of gloom and suffering over the place. But Blanche, in her sincere pity for the unhappy woman

whose melancholy history she had heard from Miss Bridget's lips, almost forgot her fears of any possible outbreak on the part of her dangerous neighbour. And she could not but own to herself that John Orpington's consistent devotion to the interests of his family entitled him to respect and esteem.

‘We were, in a manner, obliged to keep her here,’ Miss Bridget had said, in half-surly apology; ‘for a good private asylum was far beyond our means, and my brother refused to allow Amelia to be placed in a public one. John is very sensitive on some subjects. *I* was for getting the poor thing into the county asylum, and so was Barbara, but John was firm. He would not have our family concerns exposed, he said, to the prying and tattling of a pack of idle busybodies. So we keep her here, and I assure you she is carefully and kindly used, and lacks for nothing. It is not out of cruelty that we lock her up

as we do. She is comfortable enough, as far as that goes. If you would like, on one of her good days, to see her—'

But no. Blanche Morton could not reconcile herself to such an interview. Her repugnance was a sentiment too strong to be overcome. And there was one other occupant of the house in whose presence the orphaned girl was never at ease. John Orpington, in spite of the good opinions that clung to him like a mantle, in spite of his high repute and of the pride which his sisters entertained of him, remained the object of a vague and darkening terror of which Blanche was thoroughly ashamed, but which she could not shake off. The surgeon, as has been said, was seldom at home; but when his foot crossed the threshold it always seemed to Blanche as if a nameless horror the more brooded over that evil-omened dwelling, where already the air was heavy and

thick with the darkness of the gathering storm.

And yet John Orpington did nothing to justify the shadowy apprehensions for harbouring which Blanche blamed herself. His life was harmless and useful, an honest hard-working existence such as wins the surest meed of esteem from even the drones of the hive. He was not genial, certainly. His iron nerves did not appear to know the lack of relaxation, and whereas some of the sternest of men are at times as mirthful and simple as children, Mr. Orpington's mind was like a bow kept ever bent. But his temper was eminently even and his tone invariably just, reasonable, and straightforward. If there was little to love in him, there seemed to be much that should command respect. If he were too grave and staid, too free even from ordinary human foibles to attract a large share of human sympathy, his

stoicism was of a high order. There was none of that irritability that is the common attribute of weak natures, and of such strong ones as desire to dominate by sheer violence. The Whiteparish doctor never spoke a wrathful word, yet he was, in every sense of the word, the master of the house. His influence was like the force of some mighty river-current, deep and smooth and strong—too strong to babble and brawl as shallow mountain-streamlets are apt to do.

As host and as guardian his duties were discharged fairly enough, He was not one on whom the manners of polished society sat gracefully, but he evidently made an effort to treat his guest with much gentleness. His blunt directness of speech was modified when he addressed Miss Morton, and his frown more than once cut short some bitter-sweet sarcasms of the sort that Miss Barbara occasionally levelled at Blanche. Very much to the

disgust of his sisters, both of whom, austere Bridget as well as acid Barbara, had an eye to what they termed the main chance, he insisted that his ward should have a reasonable sum set aside, out of her own income, for her own use. And by his wish Blanche was more comfortable and more kindly treated, her tastes more consulted, and her inclinations more considered, than would otherwise have been the case.

And yet she did not like her guardian. She thought herself ungrateful, capricious, wrong, for the eternal sentiment of repugnance that welled up in her heart where this good man was in question. But the fact remained. She no more liked her guardian than if Plain John Orpington had been Doctor Fell.

Perhaps there was a reason for this antipathy, over and above the aversion which the surgeon so commonly inspired in those

who saw him for the first time, but which was in most cases an evanescent sentiment. An innocent and sensitive young girl is often slow to acknowledge to herself that she is the object of a preference on the part of a person in every way uncongenial and distasteful to herself; and this is especially the case when a great disparity of age or of condition exists. It was a painful thought, and one from which Blanche shrunk, as from the brink of a precipice, that her guardian might have a motive in forcing his attentions upon her. But so it was. Sometimes she found Mr. Orpington's eyes fixed upon her with an expression that she feared to read aright; and as her own colour changed beneath that unwelcome gaze, she was conscious of being regarded with the same grim smile and look of iron resolve before which she had trembled on her first introduction to the man in

whom her father had placed such confidence.

This was not all, though the other signs were slight—a pressure of the hand when her own white fingers were imprisoned in the lingering grasp of that red, short-fingered hand, whose clammy clutch she had loathed from the first; perhaps a commonplace word of clumsy compliment, or the mere inflexion of the voice: but all these told the same tale. Blanche struggled to shut her eyes to the truth, and sometimes succeeded, but other eyes were open.

‘I can’t see why on earth John makes such a fuss about that chit of a girl, unless he wants to marry her,’ said Barbara one day, with a shrill laugh.

‘Why not?’ answered her elder sister, half abstractly, looking up from her knitting-needles; ‘we should be mistresses of the house still. It would be a very good

thing, as regards money, you know. One, two, three—'

And again the bright steel needles resumed their rapid clicking.

But that was why Blanche disliked Plain John Orpington.

CHAPTER XV.

THE NUT-WOOD.

IT was one of those February days when the sky is of pale blue, laced with gold where the sunbeams fall aslant the azure purity, and when men begin to look for snowdrops in gardens, and to talk of tinted wild-flowers to be found on southern banks in sheltered nooks of the country. It is a sort of interlude between biting winter and boisterous spring. The snow is gone, and the keen breath of the east wind has not yet made itself felt. Such a day as this it was that tempted Blanche beyond the village street of White-

parish, beyond the church with its wooden tower, the churchyard with its mossy headstones and black-plumed yew-trees; and so on to the nut-wood.

Growing timber, save only at Deepdene, was rare in that sterile region, where the earth formed a thin crust over the swelling downland, and where at every gash and rent in the green turf the white lime beneath glared out in ghastly nakedness. But there was a large copse of hazel, and ash, and holly, and feathered birch, and such as these, which grew on the very brow of the hill overlooking the flat fen country; and this was the pleasantest spot within miles of Whiteparish. Here Blanche loved to sit, with a book lying beside her on the dry sandy bank; for the bank, and the ground where the wood grew, and the deep, little frequented lane where the rabbits burrowed and the titlark built, were all of sand,

brought there by one of those apparent freaks of nature that geologists call accidents. It was a quiet and a sheltered place, screened from the wind, yet commanding a wide prospect; and Blanche loved it well. From where she stood she could see over blue leagues of distance, over the wild fens where the water glistened among the willows and alders, where the spires of many little churches rose on knolls and earthen mounds, where the meadows were dotted with cattle, and where the meres shone like sheets of steel, the tall rushes waving rankly around them. And beyond the faint haze that hung over the land, dark and distant, without a sail upon it, lay the melancholy sea. Few vessels cared to stand in too close to that inhospitable shore, with its sand-banks and currents. The only sails in sight were those of the countless wind-mills, suggesting a landscape in Hol-

land, that turned lazily in the uncertain breeze.

‘I am fortunate to-day, Miss Morton—I came yesterday; but never mind that, now I find you here,’ said a man’s pleasant ringing voice, with a sound of genuine joyousness in it that its owner made no attempt to disguise. And Captain Wyvil sprang from his horse and approached, with his hand extended. Blanche took it shyly.

‘I’m afraid I startled you, Miss Morton,’ said the guardsman; ‘this deep sand prevents a horse’s feet from being heard. I’ve brought the poems—see—that you spoke of. The book came from London yesterday, and I rode over here on the chance of being lucky enough to meet you, but you did not happen to walk this way.’ And as the young man spoke he produced a little volume, the gilt edges and gay binding of which made a gorgeous livery for the verse within, and bent

his head as he placed the book in Blanche's hand, saying something the while respecting the outside of a modern poem's being better than what it covered, a smart little sentence, not wholly unstudied, and delivered with an air of half assurance, half awkwardness. The meeting was, indeed, in some measure an awkward one for both. Blanche had blushed guiltily as she recognized Captain Wyvil, and the rather so, perhaps, because she knew that the sparkle of pleasure in her eyes when first she saw who the intruder was, could not, and did not pass unnoticed.

This was not the first time that the nephew of Sir Phœbus and the ward of Mr. Orpington had met under the shadow of the nut-wood's boughs. Not the first time by some three or four. And yet it would have been unjust to say that they met by appointment, or that Blanche Morton turned her steps towards the sandy lane with any distinct intention of

meeting Captain Wyvil. But she could not hide from herself that if she did meet him, she should be glad. He was very kind to her, thus ran her thoughts, and he was a friend of her dear friend, Mrs. Davenport, who had taken so much care of her on the voyage to Europe. He was a gentleman, too, by instinct as by education, and his companionship was the more welcome on account of the contrast which his tone and manners presented to the tone and manners of those with whom Blanche's life was of necessity spent. But still she did not avow to herself that she cared for Hugh Wyvil otherwise than as a friend.

There is something of dreamy delight in the innocent soul of a young and timid girl, as she half-unconsciously marks the eagerness with which her society is sought, and her wishes studied by the male friend who is not as yet a declared lover, which is scarcely to

be fathomed by our duller masculine minds. It is like gliding smoothly down between the flower-fringed banks of a fast flowing river, without need of rudder or oar to keep the boat to her course. Below, dangers may lurk, the rock, the rapid, and the whirlpool, but as yet all is peaceful and calm, the soft murmur of gentle waters, and the cool rustle of summer boughs.

Blanche Morton was in no hurry for the sweet dream to end. It was very pleasant to her, and sources of happiness were not so abundant in that monotonous existence which she led at Whiteparish, that she should grow weary of this one. There is something at once trustful and timorous in a true woman's nature, something which at once causes her to confide in the unuttered promise, the unspoken avowal of a passion, the declaration of which she shrinks from with a coyness inexplicable even to herself. It was joy to

her to know, without owning to the knowledge—to be aware by some second sight of the affections, as it were—that this brave soldier, Hugh Wyvil, of whose gallant deeds in the ruthless Indian war she had heard, loved her. There might have been a still more secret and unacknowledged throb of happiness mixed with fear in the vague feeling that that love was returned. But Blanche did not care to pry too closely into the hiding-places of her own heart, and she was content to bask in the sunshine of the present, without scanning the vast horizon of the future.

As for Hugh Wyvil, matters stood differently with him. He was a man, in the first place, and to him belonged the initiative by right of sex, while his experience necessarily surpassed that of poor little Blanche, whose ears were slow to comprehend the first accents of her awakened heart. And a man is ordi-

narily more practical than a woman. If Captain Wyvil was silent on the one subject in common between himself and Blanche, it was not from any inability to know the state of his own mind. But he was a gentleman in the highest sense of the word, and he would not play a part that seemed selfish and inconsiderate. To 'make love' to Blanche Morton by way of agreeably whiling away the dull hours that hung heavily on his hands during his visit to Deepdene, would have seemed to him a cowardly as well as a cruel thing. To his innate chivalry of soul Blanche's orphan condition and unprotected state made her more sacred than if she had been a princess born in the purple. To treat her as a toy, to trifle with her young heart, might have been as a pastime to some men. But to have acted thus would have seemed very base in Hugh Wyvil's eyes.

And he could not marry her. His own

patrimony was a trifle. The world called him dependent on his uncle, and by the Belgravian and Pall Mall standard, marriage was beyond his means, unless his uncle should prove generous. But what would Sir Phœbus, who had set his heart upon seeing his nephew the husband of well-endowed Miss Thrale, say to Hugh's choosing a wife from under the roof of a village doctor, and without, in all probability, a sixpence. No—for the present, at any rate—Hugh Wyvil could not marry. To expect his uncle to receive Blanche Morton as his niece elect was absurd. She was much prettier than Miss Thrale, much more winning, sweet, and lovable, in her shy simplicity, than the Archdeacon's highly trained daughter. But Sir Phœbus saw Miss Thrale through a golden halo; she was beatified, as it were, by the aureole of Three per Cents., and poor pretty Blanche would never find favour in his eyes.

Yet Captain Wyvil had no particular plan. He knew very well that he did his best every day now to meet Blanche. He knew that the hours he spent in her company were very pleasantly passed, and he, in his honourable resolve to say no word of love to the girl, quite overlooked the idea that he might possibly be making the girl in love with him. But that is a notion that seldom crosses the mind of a man who is not eaten up with vanity. Men often presume too much on their own privilege of priority of speech, and, since women cannot decorously give themselves before they are asked, tacitly consider that the feminine mind is passive too.

Let these two young people talk together for awhile, as they sit side by side upon the bank, under the screen of the nut-wood's leafless boughs, while the old grey from Deepdene, his bridle fastened to a hazel stem, browses the long grass that grows within

reach. Let them rest thus for awhile, and be happy in each other's presence, none the less happy because the pleasure is unacknowledged in words. What matters it whether their gaze be bent upon the distant level of the far-stretching fen flats, or the dark sea beyond, or the swelling hills inland. They see these objects together, and that is enough to lend them a charm that would else be lacking. And what matters it on what they discourse? Let their talk be of the poet whose printed stanzas lie open between them, the ostensible reason and excuse for their meeting, or of India, or of Lincolnshire, there is the same strange zest in every topic. For are they not together? Eyes can speak as well as lips, and more eloquently sometimes, and a glance now and again, gladly received, bashfully replied to—a glance that was an audacious tell-tale in comparison with any words that the guardsman ever suf-

ferred to escape him, was enough to thrill Blanche's heart with a timorous pleasure that was almost a pain.

‘Blanche! and Captain Wyvil! I was not aware, sir, that you were acquainted with Miss Morton,’ said a strident voice, suddenly breaking in on the low murmur of their talk. They looked up startled, and saw the surgeon close to them. The soft sand of the lane had muffled the sound of Mr. Orpington's approaching tread, and there he was, with a frown on his brow and a blotch of unwholesome crimson mottling his sallow cheek, standing within arm's length of those whose interview he had surprised. That he was angry was evident, and to those who knew John Orpington well, there was something terrible in his anger—it was so rare. He must be very deeply stirred before his even temper could be ruffled. Blanche gave a little cry, and grew very pale. Captain Wyvil, with rather

a shame-faced look for a captain in Her Majesty's Guards, rose up from the bank.

‘Miss Morton and I have been fellow-travellers,’ he said; ‘I met her to-day in the course of my ride, and as I happened to have received a book from London—’

‘I quite understand,’ said Mr. Orpington, drily interrupting him—‘you are in the habit, I perceive, of accidentally meeting Miss Morton.’

‘I don't know about the habit, but I have had the good fortune to meet Miss Morton once or twice in my rambles,’ said the young officer, with heightening colour and an eye that began to sparkle with anger, for the surgeon's tone and bearing were hostile, almost offensive—‘I was introduced to her by a mutual friend, Mrs. Davenport, and if I am permitted to call on her at your house—’

‘But you are not, sir,’ said Plain John Orpington, rudely, and as he spoke, he thrust

himself between Blanche and the young officer—‘with my consent, you see this young lady no more. You need not get into a passion with me, sir; I am a plain, common-sense Englishman, and I do not choose to quarrel with you. It is my clear duty, as Miss Morton’s guardian, to prevent my ward from falling into the snares that her youth and inexperience render her only too liable.’

‘Snares! Do you dare?’ broke in Captain Wyvil, fierce enough now; with a hot flush rising to his face and a dangerous glitter in his dark-blue eyes, and there was a menace in his tone and gesture that made the surgeon recoil a step. An imploring look from Blanche stopped the angry words upon the young man’s lips. He stood undecided, his broad chest heaving with passion, and glared upon the intruder as if Plain John Orpington had been a Sepoy mutineer. For a moment Mr. Orpington

had been a little cowed by the sudden blaze of indignant wrath that his words had evoked; but it was only for a moment. He felt himself master of the situation, and his own anger seemed to cool as abruptly as it had been kindled.

‘Captain Wyvil,’ he said, in measured accents, clear, and cold, and cutting, ‘I withdraw any expression that may offend your susceptibility. But none the less must I exert, for her own good, the authority which her father’s will, and her father’s wishes have given me over this young lady, my ward. I regret the unfortunate coincidence which has caused your accidental acquaintance with Miss Morton to ripen into an intimacy of which I cannot approve, and to which I feel it my duty to put an end. And I must be permitted to be the best judge of my ward’s interests, so long as my ward is under my care.’

With these words Mr. Orpington drew Blanche's unresisting arm through his own.

'If you would only give me a fair hearing,' said Hugh Wyvil, with a bewilderment on his honest bronzed face, which caused infinite amusement to the stoical surgeon, who interrupted him again, with—

'Excuse me. I have not the slightest desire for any further explanations. I am discharging a simple duty, and I have no need to argue the point. Do you, Blanche, yourself acknowledge my authority, standing, as I do, in your poor father's place?'

'Oh, yes—yes,' said Blanche, tearfully; 'but, indeed, you are mistaken. Neither I nor Captain Wyvil—' and the sentence remained unfinished.

John Orpington, with quiet triumph in his eye, drew her away.

'Captain,' he said, 'I have the honour to wish you a very good morning.'

Hugh Wyvil stood irresolute. Blanche, with downcast eyes and scared look, was led away captive, so to speak, and he did not venture to offer his hand or to address a word to her at parting.

‘They might make her suffer for it,’ he thought to himself, ‘poor little defenceless thing.’ He had conquered, for her sake, the almost uncontrollable impulse to take the surgeon by the throat; and it was a case in which words were evidently thrown away. He stood still, watching the slight girlish form as it lessened in the distance; and when Blanche was to be seen no more he mounted his horse and rode off towards Deepdene with a loose rein and dejected mein, stalwart and melancholy as Sir Lancelot’s self.

CHAPTER XVI.

PLAIN JOHN'S OFFER.

'BLANCHE,' said Mr. Orpington, suddenly; and as he spoke he felt the slender arm tremble within his own, 'let us stay here for a moment. I have something to say to you, and it may as well be said at once.'

They had got by this time to the last meadow, and to the gate that led into a piece of waste land, burned black in patches by the embers of gipsy fires, and the ragged grass of which was considered the common property of such lean horses as drew the gipsies' tilted carts. Beyond this, in one direction, were the straggling gardens of some of the wealthier villagers, and the grey

stone wall bounding the churchyard, while on the other lay the road skirting Mr. Orpington's neglected grounds and the roofless farm buildings. A bare, ugly spot it was, with its rank beds of nettle and stray heaps of rubbish lying neglected among the charred furze stumps, yet there it was that John Orpington elected to stop and speak his mind.

Something in the surgeon's tone, she knew not what, instinctively caused Blanche to withdraw her arm from his. She stood, looking down at the grass.

'Blanche!' said the doctor, 'it was painful, doubly painful to me to find you as I did to-day. Can you guess why?'

Blanche lifted her eyes quickly. She saw in his the steady, ruthless light of a will that knew no mercy, and she turned away, quivering like an aspen, but for her very life she could not have uttered a word.

‘Now,’ said the surgeon, speaking in his slow, weighty manner, as if each word were a rivet to be clenched by the sledge-hammer of the speaker’s iron nature, ‘you need not be afraid that I shall blame you for what has occurred. How could you, young and ignorant of the world, be expected to avoid the crafty lures of a heartless profligate, a practised dangler, like that young Wyvil, who—’

‘I believe he is nothing of the kind. I believe he is the soul of honour; and I believe that you malign him,’ broke out Blanche with a sudden flash of her meek brown eyes, a sudden outburst of passionate words that almost frightened herself. The dove had become for one instant as fierce as an eagle in her indignation that this base calumny should be hissed into her ears.

But the surgeon’s grim smile only became a little grimmer, and his cruel eyes, so shrewd and so unsparing, made hers droop again.

‘Have you so little confidence in your father’s old friend that you think he would accuse another without being sure of the truth of his words?’ returned Mr. Orpington, in the cold tone of a sensible man whose integrity had been unworthily suspected, ‘or are you very sure of your own knowledge of the world that you give me the lie so pertly? My poor child,’ went on the surgeon, almost paternal in his voice and manner, ‘how little can you know of gay young military men like this acquaintance of yours, or that to them you are but the amusement of an idle hour! Had this clandestine intimacy not been discovered—but I do not wish to distress you. My sole wish is to protect and care for you, child; and I find that as your guardian I cannot sufficiently shield you from the pursuit of triflers like—well, well; I need not dwell upon the past further than to say that what has chanced to-day has only

hastened on a resolution which I have for some time formed. Blanche, I ask you to be my wife.'

She had known the hateful truth before. In his relentless eyes she had read it but too clearly. She had seen the shadow of this unutterably odious thing creeping towards her for days and weeks, and had tried to be blind to its approach. But now the words were spoken. This monstrous proposal,—for it seemed monstrous to her, on the part of such a man, so far removed from herself in all things, sounded so strangely unnatural when put into plain words, that she looked up, incredulous, as if it were an ugly jest.

'Mr. Orpington—I—your wife!'

And she turned away with such an irrepressible shudder of unconcealed loathing and fear that John Orpington's inmost soul was stung by the involuntary disgust and contempt which that glance and gesture

expressed. His mouth contracted itself into a tigerish snarl, and the blotch of coarse red rose to his cheek again, while his eyes sparkled with savage lustre. But the emotion passed away like a ripple from smooth water. Nothing but indomitable resolve to win gleamed in his steady eyes and rang in his calm voice, as he said :

‘ Yes, Blanche ; I am a plain man, and what I have to say must be put in plain words. I am sorry if the proposal does not please you. I know very well that I am by many years your senior, and that I am not the sort of bridegroom to please a girl’s fancy. I cannot sigh, and ogle, and quote poetry, as young coxcombs can. Courtship, in the common sense of the word, is not to be thought of in my case. And if it were a question of consulting my own inclinations, and mine only, I would not press you to

accept me as your husband. I would withdraw my claim.'

Blanche looked up with the quick, timid glance of a fawn. Hope, that had been almost slain, awoke in her heart again as she heard these last words, that seemed to promise some relenting on the part of this stern man to whom her father had confided her. She did not notice that this grim suitor spoke of a 'claim.' She only caught, and that eagerly, at the purport of his speech, and the prospect of release that it held out. So her soft brown eyes were raised wistfully to John Orpington's face. He on whom she looked read her thoughts as he would have read them had they been printed in a book, and there was something of a sneer upon his thin lips as the cruel words fell from them, heavy and slow, and with a deliberate emphasis on every syllable—'But it is not a question of inclination. It is a question of duty. As an honest

man's wife you will have a safe and assured position in the world, and the only sacrifice you have to make, in accepting that position, is the abandonment of a few romantic notions, a few girlish day dreams, the folly and emptiness of which you will yourself, when older and wiser, be able to appreciate. You must marry me, Blanche. So, and so only, shall I be able to fulfil the weighty trust which your late father's will has laid upon me.'

He stopped, and seemed to wait for her reply, but none came. The great tears gathered slowly in the pretty brown eyes that were bent so sadly down towards the charred turf and rank nettles at her feet, and once Blanche tried to speak, but her voice was choked by sobs, and she remained quiet, with averted head, and gave her guardian no answer. He went on, with the same resolute callousness to her distress. 'We must all of us, as we go through life, resign much that is

pleasing to us, and do much that is displeasing, for the sake of doing our duty in the world. That has been my case, for instance. I have not, as you are perhaps aware, been a self-indulgent man. I have not consulted my own ease, or my own interest, when by doing so I should have left those of my own blood and name in poverty and neglect. I gave up very fair prospects, professionally, when I left the army, that Bridget and Barbara might have a home. And when I tell you that it is right and fit that you should be my wife, you may as well do me the justice to believe that I urge you, for your own good, to comply. It is your poor father, speaking by my lips, whose voice calls on you to obey in this the most momentous affair of a woman's life.'

Still there was no answer. None, at least, but the fast dropping tears, the trembling, the pallor, of her to whom the surgeon spoke. He went on, in perhaps a softened tone :

‘The time will come when you will thank me for what I have said to day. There is no hurry about it—about the marriage itself, I mean. I will give you time, any reasonable time, to reconcile your mind by degrees to the idea which no doubt startled you from its suddenness. A few weeks—a few months delay—matter very little.’

He took her consent to his offer, then, for granted. So firm-rooted was every purpose in his inflexible mind, that he did not even assume the possibility of her option. He had told her that she must marry him. She had not the courage to raise her voice in answer to the voice that rang in her ears like the summons of a Fate. On his part, the shrewd bold man did not care to press his victory too far by striving to wring from Blanche a word of assent to his offer. He saw the girl's agitation, and wisely refrained from even the mockery of appealing to her free choice. It

was better, he felt, to assume her acceptance than to demand it at the risk of revolt.

‘Come’ he said, more kindly than before, and as he spoke he drew his ward’s arm through his—‘Come, let us go in. No more need be said just now.’ He conducted Blanche as far as the house itself, but on the threshold he left her. He had a visit, he said, to pay in the village, and must afterwards drive to a farm near Danethorpe. ‘Tell my sisters I may not get home till late. Good-by, dear Blanche!’ he said, and pressed her passive hands, and then turned and left her.

Blanche stole into the house, crept up stairs like one who feared to be followed, and when she found herself in her own little room, she flung herself on the bed and burst into a passion of wild weeping, that almost frightened herself, so convulsive was the paroxysm of sudden grief set free. Those

tears brought some relief, as women's tears will do, but a dull pain was ever there in her benumbed brain and sad, aching little heart. Poor Blanche! Poor Blanche, indeed! hers was one of those clinging, tender natures that must rest upon some strong external support or fall and die, and which are womanly to the core. There was little power to resist; little of self-assertive strength in that sweet, over-trustful soul of hers. She had not in her disposition the stuff of which rebels are made. And yet every pulse, and nerve, and fibre, every impulse and feeling, seemed to stir within her, in an agony of repugnance against the projected marriage. The difference of age, of tastes, and habits, of disposition, was in itself enough to rouse up any latent power of resistance that might be in her; but it was not only because he was uncomely, and middle-aged, and unpolished in speech and bearing, that she shrank from

John Orpington as if his touch were poison.

All Blanche's old fears of the man, quieted by habit and by time, came freshly back again to assail her timid soul, and found a thousand voices to warn her to beware. And in that agitating interview she had learned to know her own heart better than she had cared to do while she was left unmolested. Her maiden fancies had been unsubstantial, vaguely bright as woven moonshine, and she had never cared to search into her own feelings, or to practise the stern Grecian precepts as to the knowledge of self. But now the thin veil had been rudely torn away, and she knew that she loved Hugh Wyvil, and knew that she disliked and dreaded John Orpington. But the discovery added only a sharper pang to the bitterness that had come upon her. He, her guardian, the man into whose hands she had been delivered up,

helpless, claimed her as his wife, and he was not one likely to swerve from a resolution slowly matured and deliberately expressed. All the power, and the strength, and the weight of authority were on his side, so it seemed to poor bewildered Blanche, and she could scarcely hope to soften his inflexible will. And as for open resistance—she was alone, remember, and was very young and tender, and sadly ignorant and inexperienced in the world's ways—it no more crossed her mind to defy her guardian than it would occur to the gazelle surprised by a lion beside the desert fountain that it might oppose its fairy horn and feeble force to the king of beasts.

‘I wish Mrs. Davenport were here—dear Fanny Davenport—*she* could help me!’ murmured the poor girl in her despair, and then the quick sobs stifled his voice, and she wept wildly for a time, and then lay

quiescent, worn out and dulled in body and mind, like some dying Indian in the pauses of the torture. She slept at last, no healthy slumber, but the dead dreamless sleep of exhaustion that lulls the wretched who can bear no more. Meanwhile, miles away along the flinty road, John Orpington, sedately stern, drove fast between the rows of gnarled willows, whose pollard heads seemed to leer at him like ugly faces as he went by, with thoughts revolving through his busy brain, the knowledge of which, could he have read them, would have made the rough serving-man at his side shrink from his master, as if there were truth in the old fables of the were-wolf in the shape of man.

END OF VOL. I.







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